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Canada, M4Y 1B5

Telephone 416-964-3534

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**FRONT COVER:** *Ich i the Killer*

**BACK COVER:** *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*

**RIGHT:** *Run, Lola, Run*

**FACING PAGE:** *Volcano High*



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Issue 65

### New Canadian Films; Hollywood and the American Empire

Edited by Scott Forsyth  
sforsyth@yorku.ca

Submission deadline Oct. 15, 2004

Issue 66

### Questions of Value: Evaluation, Revaluation, Devaluation

Edited by Robin Wood  
richardlippe12@hotmail.com

Submission deadline Feb. 1, 2005

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# NEW DIRECTIONS?

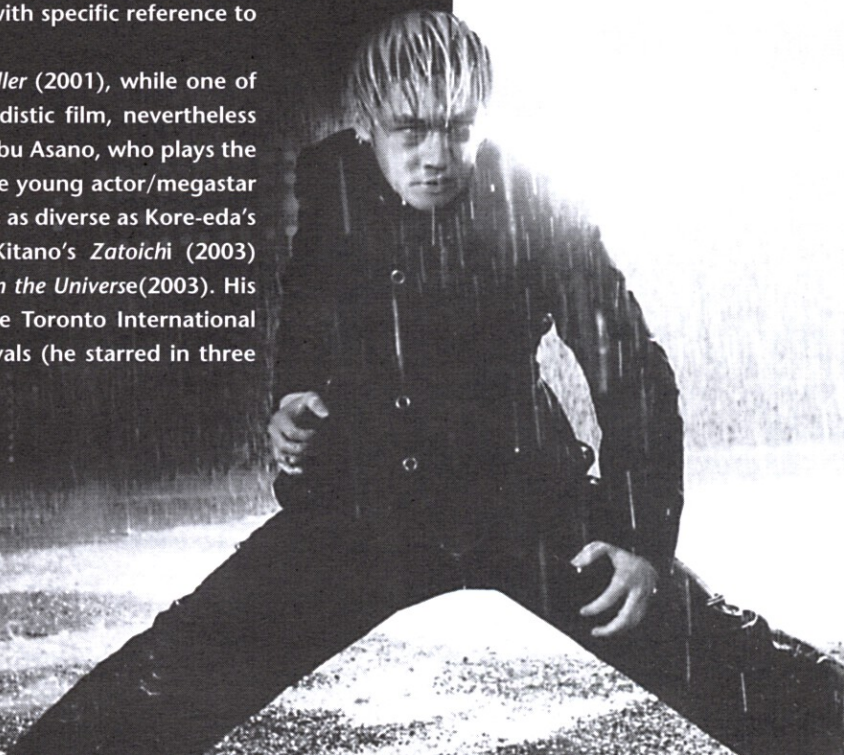
The conceit of the question mark added to "New Directions?" was intended to open up the line of possible inquiry rather than frame it too narrowly. As well, I wanted to set up a series of doubts rather than certainties about the state of film and filmmaking today. The central question here is whether there are any identifiable trends and directions in the first place. Are we, for instance, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, witnessing any sort of transformation in filmmaking, production, distribution, reception? Have the parameters changed because of a recent move towards transnationalism or multi-nationalism in film production? Is there still the possibility (or desirability) of a distinctly national cinema? At the same time, are there individual films and/or filmmakers that challenge the conventions of the medium?

One of the underlying, anxiety-producing, concerns of editing an issue of this magazine is that, once the 'call for papers' has been put out, you never know what the mail (or rather, email) will bring; that is, how your chosen theme will be materialized, 'made into flesh'—interpreted, expanded, stretched and/or manipulated. I am delighted (and relieved) to be able to say that, while the papers contained in this issue cover a lot of ground, they do so with a depth of analysis and insight that contributes to a broader understanding of the possibilities inherent in cinema today.

Four of the papers deal more or less with specific films—Spike Lee's *The 25th Hour* (2003), Gyorgy Palfi's *Huckle* (2002), Peter Howitt's *Sliding Doors* (1997), and Bernard Rose's *ivansxtc.* (2000)—firmly locating their films within the social and political issues of national identities in such a way that unfamiliarity with these films is not a deterrent. National Identity of a different sort, one concerned with the intersection of indigenous histories and contemporary filmmaking in Canada, New Zealand and Australia, is the focus of Jennifer L. Gauthier's paper on Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat/The Fast Runner* (2002), Philip Noyce's *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), and Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (2003). In addition, there are two papers that provide useful surveys of the current state of National Cinema in two areas of East Asia that have burgeoning film industries: Viet Nam and South Korea. And finally, the current darling of Japanese horror films, Takashi Miike, is the subject of a paper by Tony Williams that explores the thematic trends as well as the chronological development of this 'take no prisoners' cult figure, with specific reference to the three *Dead or Alive* films (1999-2002).

The cover image, from Takashi Miike's *Ich the Killer* (2001), while one of the least lurid images possible from his brutally sadistic film, nevertheless stands in for a 'petit hommage' on my part to Tadanobu Asano, who plays the part of Kakiyama. An amazingly talented and versatile young actor/megastar in Japan, Asano has been seen internationally in films as diverse as Kore-eda's *Distance* (2001), Oshima's *Taboo/Gohatto* (2002), Kitano's *Zatoichi* (2003) and, from Thailand, Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Last Life in the Universe* (2003). His popularity among art film directors is such that the Toronto International film Festival often seems to offer 'mini-Asano' festivals (he starred in three films in 2000, three in 2001, and three in 2003).

Susan Morrison





# Where Globalization and

## SPIKE LEE'S *THE 25<sup>TH</sup> HOUR*

BY PATRICIA O'NEILL

Spike Lee's *The 25<sup>th</sup> Hour* was the first feature film to acknowledge the attacks on the World Trade Center. In bearing witness to the devastation at ground zero and the memorials that appeared all over the city, another filmmaker might have worried about exploiting the city and the nation's grief. But New York City has always been a character in Lee's films and this time the juxtaposition of the financial district to the parks, bridges and neighborhoods of Lee's multi-ethnic characters allowed him to represent in tandem two forms of globalization at work in cities like New York. The global city, according to Saskia Sassen, is a site for a new transnational politics based on the geographical concentration of international financial institutions and disadvantaged immigrant and ethnic workers who hold the other jobs in the global economy.<sup>1</sup> Lee's New York City in the aftermath of 9/11 not only recalls his earlier sense of the tinderbox nature of the city's social organization, but also now manifests the barely repressed shame, the denied guilt, and the sneaking suspicion that what is dreadfully wrong with the world is the unresolved tension between global dreams and local realities.

Lee himself confirms the personal way New Yorkers responded to the events of that day: "I felt compelled to do it because I'm a New Yorker; I'm an American; I'm a world citizen.... I felt that it would be a missed opportunity if we did not somehow reflect how the world has changed."<sup>2</sup> If *The 25<sup>th</sup> Hour* insists on facing the shattered illusions of a once invulnerable society, it also shows that local realities and social consciousness still provide the only grounds for social or collective reconstruction. By extending his critique of social injustice against the politically disadvantaged to the terrorist attacks of Osama bin Laden, by daring to film ground zero, and by subverting the myth of the American West as a viable escape from responsibility, personal or historical, Spike Lee's film offers us one of the very few meaningful American responses to globalization and the attack on the World Trade Center.

"In its deepest sense, after all, a great city is more than a geographic or economic entity," writes James Saunders in the introduction to his book *The Celluloid Skyline*.<sup>3</sup> For Saunders, New York City has become a mythic place, "an extraordinary cultural construct spanning hundreds of indi-

vidual films." Saunderson's comprehensive and insightful survey of the ways in which New York City reflects and creates "America's archetypal metropolitan setting" underscores the importance that both film and New York City hold for the world imaginary. Yet because the myth of New York is constructed as much in the back lots of Hollywood as on location in the city, Saunders does not fully recognize the significance of Lee's special role as a New York City filmmaker. Although Spike Lee is often compared to Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese, his particular filmmaking process and vision of the city has an activist edge to it that they lack. Beyond Lee's personal affection for the place where he lives, he has represented the multiplicity of experiences that comprise the city's cultural diversity and explored the ways in which class and race together construct New York City as a global crossroads. Other filmmakers have exploited the cityscape and the energy of its streets to frame sometimes fairly limited views of its inhabitants. But Lee has worked in the opposite direction to represent the neighborhoods, the unsung bridges, parks, clubs, and dwellings where a whole range of character types drawn from ethnic minorities and immigrant populations struggle with the effects of globalization. Lee's characters give life to the city; and the city takes its meaning from our understanding of their lives.

I don't mean to suggest that Lee's goal is sociological or that his aesthetic is primarily realist, for there is little that is naturalistic in the kind of storytelling that he does. Rather Lee uses a filmic style to reveal New York City as a contact zone, a place where, in the words of Mary Louise Pratt, cultures clash because of asymmetrical power relations.<sup>4</sup> Lee's gift is in providing his audience with the kind of double-consciousness necessary for dealing with the contact zone. On the one hand we are made aware of the narrow views of the protagonists, their limitations but also their place within a network of friends and family. On the other hand, we see the protagonists caught in the wider world of class, race and gender in America and we see their struggles through Lee's eyes as representative of the stresses that afflict our contemporary social and economic situation. To this extent all of Lee's stories become quests to know the world as it is today. The characters remain characters and are usually part



# Localization Meet

of an ensemble, the setting has a local history and material significance, and the people on the streets of New York show up not as a chorus of conventional wisdom but as extensions of the characters themselves, underscoring the multiple identities that any personality must encompass in the global city today.

In his book, *The Garden in the Machine*, Scott MacDonald discusses the history of films about place. The chapter "The City as Motion Picture" focuses on films about American cities, beginning with New York City. Because, as MacDonald notes, the evolution of big industrial cities coincides with the development of motion picture technology, many early films present aspects of city life. But the genre of films known as "city symphonies" concentrates on a typical day in the life of a major metropolis. These films are both documentaries that mirror the history and national character of the place and experimental films that display the technical innovations and personal visions of the filmmakers. Thus films from Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921) to *Weegee's New York* (1950s) and Francis Thompson's *N.Y., NY* (1957) provide evidence of New York City's social complexity and its evocative power for many of America's most important experimental artists.

Into this illustrious company, Macdonald introduces Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989). By placing Lee's work in the context of the "city symphony," Macdonald reminds us that independent filmmaking has a long and distinguished history and that our understanding of contemporary narrative works demands that we extend our thinking about them beyond sensationalistic marketing or thematic critiques of the moment. The result is to see Lee's portrayal of one day in the life of one neighborhood as "paradoxically a metaphor for, a premonition of the transnational dimension of urban life around the world."<sup>5</sup> *The 25th Hour* makes the transnational dimension of New York City explicit in its attention to the destruction of the World Trade Center and the details of its many immigrant and minority cultures.

The introduction of DVD formats for home viewing has made the filmmaking process more accessible to audiences and scholars alike and has provided an excellent forum for the exploration of independent film efforts. In the case of

Edward Norton as Montgomery Brogan on the last day before his 7-year jail sentence begins.





Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*, the special features on the Criterion version are particularly informative. In a documentary on the making of the film we learn about the extensive pre-production work that was done before shooting *Do the Right Thing* on location in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn. Since the film industry usually thinks of the audience for films as passive consumers, the attention of producers is often limited to their distribution and marketability. In recent years, the cost of filmmaking on location in the city has increased substantially, and many films whose stories are situated in New York City are actually shot elsewhere. But in *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee assembled a cast and crew that reflect the diversity of the city's poorer neighborhoods. In every vignette within the film's main narrative, another brushstroke of activity or dialogue sketches for us otherwise neglected details of city life.

To an unusual extent, Lee also involved the neighborhood in the production of the film. Although New Yorkers in Manhattan are used to walking around film shoots, the people of Brooklyn who gave access and support to the film's crew and cast, became for a time active participants in the filmmaking process. Shooting on location, making a neglected block the center of world attention, and telling the events of a single day in the life of the city with a somewhat improvised organization and schedule, Lee did not change the conditions of life for the people living there, but

he obviously heightened their awareness of themselves as actors in the world and certainly astonished viewers of the film in other parts of the world. At Cannes, Lee challenged reporters from Europe to look to the racism in their own societies before they took offense at or smugly accepted Lee's critique of American racism. Beginning with *Do the Right Thing*, the authority of Lee's representation of American society has grown with each of his films, regardless of their individual success at the box office.

Similarly, *The 25<sup>th</sup> Hour* is populated with ordinary city folks: joggers, drivers, waitresses, bouncers, and crowds who stand in line to go to clubs, among whom the characters move with unassuming ease. In this way the film captures the working life of the city as much or more than the career of one individual, and to the extent that *The 25<sup>th</sup> Hour* is about New York City after 9/11, Lee's use of actors and non-actors creates sympathy not for an everyman but for the common man who in the global city is always part of an ensemble. If the processes of globalization made the World Trade Center an icon of New York City's capacity for global control, the forces of localization have given the city its uniquely neighborhood feel.

Given Lee's on-going exploration of the city's communal life, it is not hard to imagine why David Benioff's novella, from which Lee has taken the title, characters and storyline of his film, had such appeal to the director. And indeed one

The dog represents Monty's one good deed, but the rest of his life seems "touched" by denial and betrayal.





of the more intriguing aspects of the DVD formatted version of *The 25<sup>th</sup> Hour* is that Benioff's commentary contributes another way of analyzing the significance of the film. The novella was written before the attack, however, and as its author acknowledges, the inclusion of the event in the film's immediate memory and the treatment of the site of the attack permit us not only to view the devastation but also the work of survival. That Lee would include among the important changes he made to Benioff's book the filming of the site of the vanished World Trade Center is not, after all, surprising. For Lee to avoid the site, to pretend that nothing had happened as filmmakers who digitally removed the twin towers had implied, was anathema to his commitment to New York City as a material place. Lee chose instead to reflect the mood as well as the physical damage caused by the attacks in order to challenge the viewer to recall and reflect upon this moment in New York's history. And by weaving history into the story of Benioff's protagonist, the film transforms the symbolic impact of the protagonist's choices and fate.

The main character, Montgomery Brogan/Ed Norton, spends his last day before reporting to Otisville Prison saying goodbye to family, friends and the city that has been so much a part of his daily experience. Although it was not Benioff's intention to see the story of Montgomery Brogan as an allegory for the United States and the consequences of its role in globalization, Lee's visual emphasis on a post 9/11 cityscape and the self-accusations and conflicts between the characters give the movie a confessional tone, a sense of at least potential awareness of how "bad luck" might also be interpreted as bad choices.

The first person Brogan confronts with the question of blame is his father. They meet at the father's Irish pub, which is decorated with memorials for the local firemen who died heroically when the Trade towers collapsed. When Mr. Brogan/Brian Cox begins to insinuate that Monty should not have become involved with a drug ring, Monty reminds him that he started dealing drugs to save the alcoholic father's business after Monty's mother's death. We also learn that Mr. Brogan has political connections, friends whom he suggests might help Monty with his case. From their conversation, we understand the sense of networks and community relationships; the unofficial governing structure of the metropolis, that at once provides opportunities and ensnares individual ambitions. Monty rejects his father's help. In the restroom he looks in disgust at the words "Fuck you" marked on the mirror over the sink. According to Benioff's commentary, this scene alludes to a passage in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, a book that the author read in high school, like so many other American kids. More sophisticated than Salinger's character, Monty looks at himself and then begins to curse the various races and sub-cultures of the city for their hypocrisies and self-deceptions, including those he identifies with his friends and family. Drawing on news stories of the day, Monty also attacks the social injustices of the city leaders, the hypocrisy of government, and the villainy of Osama Bin Laden. The idea of the monologue comes from Benioff's book but here it gets added ammunition from its allusion to 9/11 and its

aftermath and to a similar sequence in *Do the Right Thing*. In both films, Lee shows how the individual's immediate sense of anger over social and economic inequality contributes to a general pattern of racist stereotypes that perpetuate social divisions among people who otherwise share the same frustrations with the city's political economy.

While Monty's tirade recalls the name-calling chorus by several characters in *Do the Right Thing*, it also extends the sense of social division to the city's geography. Different groups are represented by the names of their neighborhoods: Chelsea Boys, the Bronx, the ladies of the Upper East Side, etc. Whereas the street in Bed-Stuy seemed to be a microcosm for the city as a whole, Monty sizes up the city as a conglomeration of warring nations, defending their turf by excluding others, and so like a house divided, it cannot stand. Only in Monty's consciousness of his own culpability does a sense of affiliation reestablish itself. At the end of his tirade, he looks at his image and curses himself. Monty's recognition of himself as no better than those others with whom he lives in the global city is an important step in the film's coming to terms with questions of responsibility and fate. Thus it is with a new sense of sympathy that some of these faces reappear at the end of the film to acknowledge their kinship with Monty as he leaves town on his way to serve his prison term.

Reviews of *The 25<sup>th</sup> Hour* show how much Monty's "Fuck you speech" suggested itself as both a signature Spike Lee montage and a moment when questions of blame link Monty's story to the events of 9/11. For one London reviewer, this scene reveals "New York's self-hatred and co-dependency on its ethnic diversity. This is a hymn to New Yorkers' compulsion to live looking disaster in the face, or at least to walk and talk it as if they were. But in the end we get a sense of a city whose own narcissism remains untamed by disaster. ... Monty's litany may say, "Fuck New York", but really it feels as if he's saying fuck everywhere but." <sup>6</sup> This view rightly notes the ways in which New York City's status as a global city sets it apart from many other towns and cities in America. But whatever narcissism has lead Monty to his fate, Lee's perspective as a filmmaker is anything but parochial. The making of both *Do the Right Thing* and *The 25<sup>th</sup> Hour* suggests instead Lee's politically savvy understanding of the interconnections of globalization and localization both in the circumstances of his filmmaking and in the visual representation of the city.

With the reluctant approval of his producers, Lee was able to keep in the final version of the film an extraordinary long take of Monty's high school friends talking in front of a window that gives the viewer a bird's eye view of ground zero less than a year after the disaster. Jake Elinsky/ Philip Seymour Hoffman has never been to Frank Slattery's/Barry Pepper high-rise apartment downtown and has not seen much of Monty either since their days together at a private high school. Yet there is clearly a bond between the middle-class, Jewish high school teacher and these two Irish scholarship boys. Jake is appalled by Frank's dire predictions about Monty's future, but as we look over their shoulders into the lighted pit where once stood the tallest buildings in NY's cityscape, Frank's sarcasm and Jake's naiveté are



both overwhelmed by a sense of dread that life will never be the same, not only for Monty, but for anyone. As their conversation ends, the camera dollies to the window so that we look directly on the scene of ruin. The haunting score of Terence Blanchard, which mixes Irish and Arabic elements, and the lingering shots of slow moving trucks and bulldozers pay tribute to the devastation. In the nighttime work of the clean-up crews, we are also given a sobering look at how the work of the city never stops. Filming these non-actors on location without permission or control, Lee offers us a documentary moment without any specific suggestion for how we should interpret it.

For Benioff, Monty's friends have been luckier than Monty; they are survivors who have to deal with their guilt over Monty's bad luck. But the film as a whole emphasizes another side of the story. The long take that frames Frank and Jake and their shadowy reflections in the window overlooking ground zero creates contiguity if not comparison between these men and the events of 9/11. Frank notes that Monty has been living high on other people's miseries. Later he will blame Monty's Puerto Rican girlfriend Naturelle Rivera/ Rosario Dawson for taking advantage of the lifestyle Monty's drug-dealing has supported, but the guilt that brings Monty, Frank and Jake together is part of a social malaise for which we can see ground zero as either the objective correlative or the result on a global scale of the tragic consequences of the nation's unthinking sense of entitlement. For if Monty is to blame for participating in an international drug cartel run by Russian mobsters, Jake accuses Frank of defrauding foreign governments through his high risk dealings in financial markets. At the same time Jake must deal with his own feelings of alienation and loneliness and his attraction to one of his high school students.

The difference between bad luck and bad choices becomes increasingly hard to define in this world of personal and global interdependence. The shots of ground zero may be understood as non-narrative moments, justified only by the will of the film's auteur director. In that case, we can be grateful for Lee's foresight in preserving the mood of the city and the visual impact of the altered skyline for an otherwise all too amnesiac culture. But the sense of regret for missed opportunities and blind ambitions also offers an interpretive lens or frame for contemplating the reasons for the terrorist attack.

In associating this story with shots of ground zero, Lee's film was bound to shock reviewers. One Canadian critic wrote: "It's all very timely and moving, but what does it have to do with a story about the last hours of freedom of a convicted drug pusher? Is Lee making a gritty urban drama or auditioning to make the next series of 'I Love New York' commercials?"<sup>7</sup> But a San Francisco reviewer notes that everyone in the movie seems to have been "hit on the head and just coming to.... Uncertainty, denial, anger, these characters represent our own befuddled reactions to the end of a world where perhaps we thought we were innocent but really had already traded on our souls."<sup>8</sup> Such an interpretive leap would not be possible without Lee's direction.

Trivializing, opportunistic, or hauntingly suggestive, the film demonstrates Lee's unwavering commitment to docu-

menting the global city. In *Do the Right Thing*, violence explodes against the hegemonic power of the white establishment. But in *The 25th Hour* Lee embraces the cultural and ethnic diversity of the city in defiance of those who have tried to destroy it. If Monty's story is not an allegory for the bad choices that led to the attacks of 9/11, the flags and memorials for those who died that show up in the background of so many scenes in the film provoke our sympathy for the truly bad luck of innocent victims, especially the firemen of local No. 5 in Staten Island, to whom the film is dedicated. The recurring shots of American flags and flowers permeate the atmosphere of the film and provide a counterpoint to the poetic and elegiac theme underlying Monty's father's fantasy of a "life that came so close to never happening."

Despite the fact that Benioff, Lee and actor Edward Norton agreed that Montgomery Brogan was not a sympathetic character, the film's depiction of the loyalty of his friends and lover, the concern he shows for his dog, his restraint when given the opportunity to avenge himself on the man who tipped off the police, and his general affability create a sense of Monty not as the drug-dealing exploiter of urban youth, but the misguided city kid whose ambiguous character is reflected in the city itself. As Mick LaSalle writes, "Samuel Johnson once said that when a man is tired of London, he's tired of life. Lee is showing that when a man is sick of New York, he's sick of the world and everything in it."<sup>9</sup> In following Monty over the course of one day, Lee details the locations and social life of a city that are essential to Monty's identity. As Lee has said of himself, "I live here. I grew up here. So this is my home. It's always going to be my home."<sup>10</sup> It is initially curious, then, that the film should end with an extended fantasy about a new life out west.

As Monty and his father drive north along the West Side Highway toward the prison, Monty's father suggests that they take the George Washington Bridge instead and drive west. In a dream-like sequence, the father narrates a future in which Monty and he see the country that lies beyond the city. They will go as far as Texas, where no one will know him. While Monty's father's voice-over explains, the visual scene becomes increasingly golden. Monty will get a job and make a new life for himself and then sometime later Naturelle will join him and they will marry and have children. When he is old he will tell his kids and grandkids of his story and how close he came to never having such a life. The story and the scenes remind us of the promise that going west had for eastern and immigrant families in the nineteenth century and again after World War II. Although Mr. Brogan insists that Monty will always miss New York, that the city is somehow in his bones, the idyllic future that he imagines captures the American dream of a new life elsewhere and the conventional promise of the classical Hollywood film of a happy ending. Then the film returns us to Monty's bruised face and the car that is heading inexorably north.

Although some viewers have thought the ending ambiguous, Lee is clear that in the end Monty goes to prison, that the proposed trip out west and the new life





Bad luck or bad choices? Monty confronts his father with the reasons for his involvement with the drug trade.

Monty's father imagines for his son is just a fantasy. What is striking for the viewer is the way the film taps into America's mythology about the west so perfectly only to undercut its possibility as a solution. Surely the beauty of the scenery, the feel of open spaces and people far removed from the rush and tumble of New York City would justify a little poetic license with the plot. Instead the sweet dream of escape from responsibility functions as Lee's tribute or, perhaps, rebuttal to John Ford and his representations of the conflict between eastern dreams and western realities. The coda to the film resists both amnesia for what has happened and nostalgia for a time that never was and never will be. Instead *The 25th Hour* embraces the difficulties of the present in order that the victims of 9/11 will not be forgotten nor have died in vain. The circle of globalization has closed; there is no open frontier.

Despite the timidity of the film industry and its shabby failure to promote this film, *The 25th Hour* is an invaluable contribution to American cultural studies. By bearing witness to the many facets and changes that have shaped New York City as a global city and local habitat for a new transnational awareness, Lee's films provide some of the only occasions for engaging viewers' social consciousness. We are made to look at the physical damage left behind in the wake of violence. As the first major director who had the courage to film the site of the 9/11 attack and weave the memory of that cataclysmic event into the everyday lives of his characters, Lee has at least made the point that the devastating change is real, that destruction has an unavoidable material dimension and that simulations of New York City

off location are evading lived experience. Lee's filmmaking process in this case offers us as important a view of the effects of globalization on the local realities of New Yorkers as the story itself.

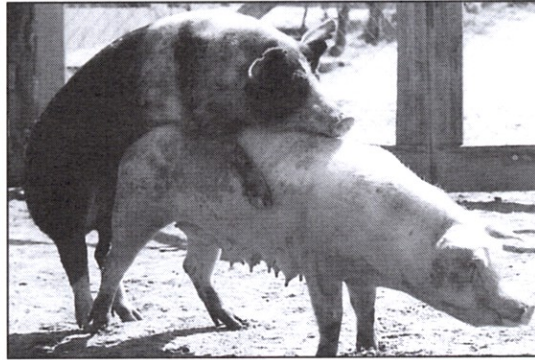
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**Patricia O'Neill** teaches literature and film at Hamilton College in New York State. She is currently working on a book-length study of globalization's effects on film production, especially the representation of place.

#### NOTES

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- 9 LaSalle, 23 May 2003.
- 10 Massood, 10 January 2003.





# The Politics of Hiccups

NATIONAL CINEMA WITHOUT NATIONAL LANGUAGE

BY ANIKÓ IMRE

## 1. The End of Eastern and Central European Historical Allegory

Films from Eastern and Central Europe<sup>1</sup> are rarely discussed outside the national-cinema framework. They are reputed to have a unique regional sensibility: a tragic or ironic preoccupation with national history permeates virtually every film made in the former Soviet Bloc. This preoccupation takes a variety of aesthetic forms and ideological directions, from realistic historical epics adapted from classics of national literature to "existentialist" films, in which the historical background is projected onto the moral screen of the hero-protagonist.<sup>2</sup> Films generally selected as representative of East and Central European cinemas during the Cold War, such as Andrzej Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*, 1958), Miklós Jancsó's *The Red and The White* (*Csillagosok, katonák*, 1967), István Szabó's *Mephisto* (1980) or Ján Kadár's *The Shop on Main Street* (*Obchod na korze*, 1965) all process traumatic moments of collective history in an allegorical language that projects the past onto the unspeakable, politically oppressive present, assuming a national audience eager and able to decode the Aesopean inscriptions.

The end of the Cold War pulled the rug from under the Eastern and Central European tradition of allegorical filmmaking. Tragic and romantic heroes are out of place in the age of the triumphant, global postmodern, where no truth is taken for

TOP: *Huckle's animal kingdom*



granted, where identities and identifications proliferate well beyond the narrow confines of nationalism, and where the heroic is inconceivable without the ridiculous. The end of communist censorship, the end of the Manichean opposition between oppressor and oppressed that had characterized Soviet-type cultures rendered the Aesopian double talk superfluous. Changing conditions of filmmaking, distribution, and exhibition have left East and Central European filmmakers and audiences in a state of confusion. However, after the initial shock over losing most of their state funding and guaranteed domestic exhibition, most post-socialist film industries bounced back by the mid-nineties.

The end of the Cold War made its mark on world cinema and film criticism as well, leaving both cold towards formerly celebrated East and Central European national allegories. This loss of prestige has little to do with audiences: gloomy East and Central European films had only interested select groups of film buffs outside of the region even during socialism; while, for the most part, they had lost touch with entertainment-starved, message-burdened domestic audiences long before 1989. Rather, what became evident after the fall of the Wall was that the genre of national historical film had been partially propped up by Western festival critics themselves. In other words, it is likely that what had lent East and Central European films such a unique position in world cinema during the Cold War was not necessarily the aesthetic value of the films or the originality of the filmmakers but Western investment in the idea of "good nationalism" – of nations firmly embedded in teleological history united around the voice of the white male genius—a notion that East European filmmakers eagerly embraced and perpetuated themselves.

I wish to contribute to the process of reassessing the validity of East and Central European national cinemas and their critical reception from the vantage point we have gained in the fifteen years since the end of the Cold War. My primary interest is in the transformation of the allegorical form vis-à-vis the East and Central European nation caught up in processes of globalization in every sphere of culture. I will first sketch out some disruptions and continuities between the allegorical East and Central European film of the Cold War and films produced in the post-socialist period. The rest of the essay will be devoted to the case study of a film that has creatively and successfully bridged the divide between old and new filmmaking traditions and audience expectations: György Pálfi's *Huckle* (2001). I am interested in how such a transition manifests itself in several interrelated areas: film style, allegorical film structure and interpretation, the position of the artist-filmmaker, the complexities of the film's address and audience, and the post-Cold War conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition for Eastern and Central European films.

My ultimate goal is to initiate in studies of film cultures what has already occurred in East and Central European cultures on a larger scale: to remove their "unique" label and see what the label has been protecting; to open up these transitional cultures to comparisons that question and critique the national. Such a perspective should contribute to determining whether "national cinema" is still a

valid category at all; and, if so, how we should understand it in an arguably post-national, post-historical age.

## 2. Transitional Voices

It has become a central preoccupation for filmmakers and critics in post-socialist cultures to decide who is to blame for the miserable domestic reputation and box-office revenues of national films: filmmakers themselves, who, with few exceptions, have been producing titanic, navel-gazing film experiments since the late 1970s without concern for the audience, or the 'uneducated' public, who would rather consume the trash dumped onto European markets from the Hollywood genre film machine than perform the patriotic duty of watching national films.<sup>3</sup>

Several alternatives have been tried throughout Eastern Europe to break Hollywood's genre-film monopoly and attract domestic audiences to the theatres: a large number of, largely derivative, local or co-produced thrillers, comedies and action-adventure flicks have tried to adapt the conventions of genre films to East and Central European conditions. The logic of these productions is predictable and justifiable. As a critic writes about Jaroslav Soukup's enormously successful *Friend in the Rain Part II – Story from Brooklyn* (1992), the film has "as many neon lights, long-legged blonds, and men with ponytails as anything to come out of Hollywood. If the fact that the characters speak Czech (except when they're manifesting their hipness by speaking English) seems incidental, it's not. If the Czechs want to watch *Body of Evidence* instead of *Howard's End*, better it be made in their own country where at least it keeps the studios working."<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, the first Polish films of the transition that proved truly popular among native audiences were the comedy *Controlled Conversations* (Sylvester Checinski, 1991), and the action comedy *Kroll* (Wladyslaw Pasikowski, 1991). In Hungary, *Europa Express* (Csaba Horváth, 1999), substituting Ukrainian Mafiosi for the customary Italian-Americans, guaranteed success just by virtue of being the first Hungarian action-adventure film, paving the way for other popular films such as the light slapstick comedy *Out of Order* (András Kern, 1997).

The interest in national history has not waned, either. Jan Hřebejk carried on the aesthetic-political legacy of the Czech New Wave in films such as *Divided We Fall* (2000) and *Pupendo* (2003). In recent Polish patriotic historical epics such as *Pan Tadeusz* (Andrzej Wajda, 1999), *With Fire and Sword* (Jerzy Hoffman, 1999), or in their more controversial Hungarian equivalent, *The Bridge Man* (Géza Bereményi, 2002), crowd-pleasing spectacle substitutes for the justifying mission of national dissidence against the oppressive socialist regime. Such films, while professionally produced, can only be considered nostalgic, narcissistically wallowing in national despair or bathing in national triumph. But, even though such films have demonstrated masterful adaptation skills among new market conditions, bringing in significant revenues both domestically and internationally, they have hardly brought new voices to world cinema. In their effort to appeal to a nostalgic sensibility, they celebrate national history as entertainment and entirely gloss over the question of how to think of history



and nation in a post-socialist, post-historical era.

The film *Hukkle*, made by young Hungarian director György Pálfi, was Hungary's official entry in the 2002 competition for the Academy Awards in Best Foreign-Language Film and a festival success around the world. Not the least because of its success abroad, it attracted 25,000 viewers to the cinemas in Hungary. While this number is negligible compared to the number of people who go to see Hollywood blockbusters, it constitutes a welcome break for Hungarian films, widely considered among distributors a cultural mission at best since the days of government funding ended.<sup>5</sup> Pálfi unites stylistic innovation and self-reflectivity with a concern for reaching audiences. He pitches the film to an international audience of film buffs, among whom many Hungarian and other East European viewers are glad to find their place.

*Hukkle*'s "new voice", with its surprise effect on native and international viewers, seems to hinge on the fact that it creates a kind of continuity between the before and the after that goes deeper than subject matter, stock characters, or aesthetic solutions. Rather, its enigmatic mix of tones and genres resonates with people's experience of confusion during the transition from national to global affiliations.

### 3. Genre-Mixing

The difficulties of describing Pálfi's film begin with the title. "Hukkle" is an onomatopoeic word that imitates hiccups. It belongs to the Hungarian language no more than it does to any other one. Hiccups take on a life of their own in the film, providing a steady digestive rhythm that moves the plot along and structures its various elements. The old man who performs the hiccups is an inhabitant of the Hungarian village where the film takes place. The wrinkled, toothless, silent old man is less of an independent character than a medium through whom the movie's heartbeat is made audible to the viewers. None of the other humans – mostly actual village dwellers in the actual Hungarian village of Ozora – have speaking roles or narrative functions that would invite identification. The camera observes them with the same uninhibited and bemused curiosity with which it observes the local fauna and flora – a dying cat, which turns into a disintegrating carcass and then a pile of sun-dried bones in front of our eyes; a mole's underground journey to the surface—filmed from the animal's point of view—where it is killed by a hoe and tossed to a dog to eat; an underwater sequence about a frog swallowed by a catfish, which, in turn, gets caught on a fishing hook and subsequently consumed by a human, whose digesting body is penetrated by X-Ray-like shots as he eats; a gigantic pig repeatedly strolling down the street looking for mates; or a white flower growing and blooming in an artificially accelerated process.

Thus, there is a documentary impulse at work, which seems to accomplish two generically different projects in one: a nature show in the manner of the Discovery Channel or *Microcosmos* (*Microcosmos: Le peuple de l'herbe*, Claude Nuridsany and Marie Perennou, 1996), and a village ethnography. The latter continues the venerable tradition of Hungarian literary ethnography, which was carried on by

ethnographic documentary films throughout the socialist era. "Village films," that is, realistic fiction films set in a rural environment, have come to constitute a veritable East European genre.<sup>6</sup> Films such as Wajda's *The Birch Wood* (*Brzezina*, 1970), Zanussi's *Family Life* (*Zycie rodzinne*, 1971), László Ránódy and Gyula Mészáros's *Nobody's Daughter* (*Árvácska*, 1976), Péter Bacsó's *The Witness* (*A tanú*, 1969), Zoltán Fábry's *Merry-Go-Round* (*Körhinta*, 1956) or Jirí Menzel's *My Sweet Little Village* (*Vesnicko má stredisková*, 1985), in their different ways, all use the village setting to communicate something about the peculiar provinciality of life in Eastern Europe in general.

As Dina Iordanova argues, East and Central European cities have evolved under different historical conditions than West European metropolises; the former remained fairly small, intimate and isolated, devoid of the class divisions and typically urban problems of West European cities.<sup>7</sup> While the filmmakers' approaches to the provincial backwaters range from sympathetic humour (*My Sweet Little Village*) to depicting the village as the ultimate expression of desolation devoid of humanity (Béla Tarr's *Satan's Tango/Sátántangó*, 1994), in most "village films" villagers hold up a mirror to the intellectual urbanite. They are used as allegorical characters through whom the city-dweller is able to represent – often even critique—himself. If we look at this mechanism through the analogical dynamic of colonization, we inevitably need to ask if village films commit representational violence against the unsuspecting villagers, who are most often presumed to live sub-intellectual, even sub-human, emotionally impoverished lives.

Questions of representational violence have rarely been asked of East and Central European films. It is fair to ask Pálfi why he chose a small village for the setting of *Hukkle*, a film which barely credits its voiceless amateur actors, while obviously addressing a cosmopolitan audience. The spectacular photography and manipulative editing, catering to viewers whose sensibilities are shaped by television and digital media, are offset by the almost complete lack of dialogue. People in the village are not shown using the national language to communicate. There is a rich soundtrack, but it is entirely made up of amplified, often artificially created noises – doors slamming, animals moving, a garbage truck making its rounds on dirt roads, or flowers growing. The film foregrounds the technical manipulation of image and sound – most shockingly in a special-effects sequence at the end of the film, in which an American fighter plane swoops under the local bridge causing a minor earthquake in the village. The documentary effort, then, is rendered unreal, or hyper-real, by underscoring the use of state-of-the-art surveillance and simulation technology.

The film's official website ([www.hukkle.hu](http://www.hukkle.hu)) further extends the film's address to the technologically savvy and playful by inserting credits, a shooting diary, and information about the director and the cast within clever, interactive visual games positioned against shadow-puppet-like stock images of a generic village: the stork, the house, the bench, the pond. One can move around the circular site horizontally, arriving at the same spots again and again with no apparent escape, emulating the cruel, imprisoning





Gendered play in East European cinema: *My Sweet Little Village*.

rhythm of life in the filmic village. As one navigates the site, a human-hand icon appears from hiding to reveal information, which emerges from the stork's beak, from a half-empty bottle, or from under the roof of a house. This gives us an interpretive clue as to the filmmaker's purpose for the village setting: it is a puppetry set; a place that allows for the allegorical manipulation of formulaic, simple images. This also makes one wonder where the real action is. What goes on behind the simulated shadows?

In addition to visual ethnography, allegorical village film, nature show, and what a critic calls the current international mini-genre of subtitle-free, deliberately "quiet projects,"<sup>8</sup> there is also a thriller element: one by one, the men of the village mysteriously disappear. It seems that the murderers form a dark conspiracy of village women, who use the extract of an innocent-looking, lily-like white flower as deadly poison. Thus, the film also functions as a Hollywood genre film infused into a European art film, somewhat like a documentary in David Lynch's style. The viewers are motivated by narrative suspense to figure out why the murders occur and how the film will end. The village policeman, whose father is murdered by his own mother, takes on the role of the audience stand-in, the detector. This helps maintain the audience's suspense, even though one suspects that, in a film made up of such disparate generic elements, there is no final answer in the end. Yet, even if there is no single key to the puzzle, there is a certain allegorical coherence to this "film style game" or "artistic experiment", as the director calls it on the website.

The appeal of the film, I believe, is to be found in the fact that it successfully taps into and replicates the experience of a transition from an order embedded in the relative safety and isolation of the national community to a frightening but also liberating global order. In this new world, community can only be reproduced virtually, from a variety of camera angles, manipulated by digital technology and sophisticated editing; and the national language is muffled under a combination of noises that obliterate the difference between organic and artificial. This experience is at once subjective and collective, aesthetic and political, abstract and visceral. The film represents all these levels at once as interconnected, eliciting an emotive interpretation that exceeds the usual auteurist, national-cinema categorizations of East and Central European film criticism.

Unlike most other films of the transition, which either continue clinging to the familiarity of national history or bypass national allegory altogether in favour of the conventions of genre cinema developed elsewhere, *Huckle* draws on and merges both alternatives under its allegorical umbrella, much as they merge in people's daily experiences. The village is a frozen image of the past, a memory of the idealized national community that, the film's ironic distance and painstakingly constructed realism imply, may have never existed in the first place. Watching the old man sit on a bench in front of his house all day, men playing leisurely bowl games in the street, or a shepherdess tending to the herd, are reminders of a world about to disappear or already nostalgically staged for the tourist's camera. The village as allegorical tableaux mobilizes local reflexes of an



older, typological kind of reading familiar from the Cold War, prompting the audience to decode an abstract film language that masks a politically unutterable message. But this expectation gets sidetracked and undermined by the expectation of reading a Hollywood genre film: who is committing the murders and why? The allegory that emerges from these two, typically contrasting expectations exposes its structural self-contradiction: the fact that allegory both satisfies the need for thinking in essentialist binary oppositions (a didactic function) and calls attention to the artificiality and instability of such binary oppositions (a performative function).

#### 4. A Post-Socialist Allegory

Allegory is a complex term that can equally refer to a genre, a trope, or an interpretive approach. *Huckle*'s allegorical structure not only evidences this complexity but also provides a platform for arguing that allegory has been understood reductively, limited to its didactic function, in relation to East and Central European film cultures. Most interpretations of East European films during the Cold War insisted on reducing allegory to its Romantic, typological understanding, which assumes a transcendental authority – in this case, the nation – and a transparent interpreter, who is outside of politics – in this case, the intellectual/artist. The latter is presumed to have absolute faith in and unlimited access to the truth of a sacred text – national history. This approach ignores the structural paradox that post-structuralist thinkers such as Paul de Man and Jonathan Culler identified at the heart of allegory in a post-Romantic world: a contradiction between allegory's goal (to articulate something ideal and atemporal) and its medium (language, which unfolds its time, through a linear progress of signification).<sup>9</sup> This contradiction results in a permanent tension between allegory's didactic and performative functions. Allegory's investment in what de Man calls the "rhetoric of temporality" means that it is inherently involved in writing history; it is at the heart of the discursive struggle over historical authority.<sup>10</sup>

East and Central European literary and cinematic allegories produced during the Cold War, however, remained largely fossilized in their typological form, effacing the act of interpretation and the interpreter's subjectivity. This critical reduction persisted even in relation to the playful, self-referential postmodernist aesthetic forms that accompanied the political thawing of the 1970s and 1980s. In Hungary, a large number of filmmakers and other artists renounced the lofty, tragic purpose of opposing communism and acknowledged, instead, the intellectual's/interpreter's inevitable cooptation within the system, or claimed an (untenable) apolitical status.<sup>11</sup> The uncertainty that surfaced within the allegorical form of these postmodernist texts, however, stopped short of questioning the nation's essential Europeaness and the intellectual's privileged mediatory role in maintaining this Europeaness. In the Hungary of the 1980s, this resulted in films that sustained the privileged status of national cinema and continued to rely on the support of the nation state, despite the fact that they had renounced the responsibility of representing, sympa-

thizing with, or in any way reaching out to "the people." Such films became allegories of struggling intellectuals who are not appreciated enough by their native audiences and provincial states. As a result, Hungarian films became increasingly disconnected from national audiences, addressing a small circle of like-minded intellectuals, registering their class crisis in a world of compromise.

While Anglo-American post-structuralist theory takes allegory to be the ultimate trope for discourse itself,<sup>12</sup> such a radical conception is inadequate for understanding transitional East and Central European film cultures without analogical insight from theories of postcoloniality. As Reda Bensmaïa argues, in post-Independence cultures, allegory was initially called upon to legitimate the unity and sacredness of the new nations. However, the postcolonial disillusionment with the ideals of national independence and the compromised creative power of the postcolonial intellectual brought about an aesthetic shift, which foregrounded the gap between the pedagogical and performative functions of allegory, and acknowledged the crisis of the hermeneutic stability of national history and national allegory. As a result, Bensmaïa claims, it is no longer possible to read Third World allegories as "self-righteous and predetermined discourses on good and evil, on the pure and the impure, on true and false identity, on the glorious past scorned by colonialism . . ."<sup>13</sup>

The shift from "politically committed" allegorical films produced by politically traumatized East and Central European artists to contemporary films characterized by a "post" consciousness is analogical in structure to the transformation of post-Independence allegories. To understand what terms like "politically committed" efface – the interpretational uncertainty of allegorical narratives – we should remind ourselves of the Althusserian tenet that history is not a text, not a narrative, but an absent cause, and, like the Lacanian Real, is inaccessible, except in a form mediated by what Fredric Jameson calls the political unconscious.<sup>14</sup> In Jameson's sense, the prevalent way of interpreting East European allegories would qualify as a "weak interpretation," that is, the kind of ethical criticism that perpetuates certain moral codes without questioning them on the authority of some metaphysical thought – in this, case, national history, which sutures national subjects into the near-religious bond of nationalism. Such interpretations essentially collaborate with nationalism and freeze the status quo that benefits a small group both in Eastern Europe and abroad. By contrast, "strong interpretation," or rewriting, takes into account a process of mystification and repression at work.<sup>15</sup> *Huckle* goes farther than most recent East European films in demystifying nationalism, but – much like Bensmaïa's post-Independence, self-deconstructive allegories—it still has registers that go beyond conscious intention and remain accessible only through "strong" interpretation.

#### 5. Consumption and Gendered Conspiracy

Similar to the way in which Reda Bensmaïa wishes to re-read Algerian allegories as narratives that are not about a place of history, but, rather, about a place becoming, to be



made, (re)written,<sup>16</sup> one senses an impulse in *Hukkle* to minimize the importance of national history. The film does not speak on behalf of a suffering nation, or even of a freedom-deprived intellectual class. It still occupies the position of a national film by virtue of being produced in a small, dependent country, which is necessarily represented to other cultures as well as to itself through allegorical simplifications. As Stephen Slemon argues, the “Manichean master code” continues to operate in the world of neo-colonialism through fixed oppositions that allow the “colonizer” to read the “other” as fixed in a permanent position of subordination.<sup>17</sup> But the observer in *Hukkle* remains emotionally distant from its objects, even when those objects are inches away from the camera. Apart from his mocking visual and acoustic humour, he remains invisible and indifferent, offering no invitation to identify or sympathize with its world of creatures.

The film depicts an indifferent universe, in which people are caught up in a universal and natural process of consumption. Or, conversely, the film hints that it is possible that even “nature” exists primarily as a set of manipulated images and noises, as a subject to be transformed by audio-visual technology and served up for human consumption. There is nothing apparently tragic about this all-consuming digestive rhythm in the way Nazi persecution or Communist trials were in earlier films. While universal consumption is undeniably linked with death and murder, no one in the film shows any sorrow, remorse or, indeed, any emotion. After the urban grandchild who is visiting Grandma dies from accidentally licking poisoned food, his parents and grandparents follow the little coffin to the cemetery with the same vacant expression that they had on during the fatal dinner. Animals are shown killing and eating one another as a matter of course, as a natural function of their position in the food chain. A sense of alarm arises only from realizing that people murder one another with the same indifference. They blindly follow the logic of consumption like zombies, forgetting even to speak, their last link to humanity. Indeed, the only dialogue we hear in the film is on TV, as the investigating policeman’s mother watches a Latin-American soap opera, creating a metaphorical connection between indifferent consumption and the spiritual death brought on by commercial media.

The horror of media consumption is a familiar theme in recent world cinema and popular culture. In one of *Videodrome*’s (David Cronenberg, 1983) most memorable scenes, for instance, the television set becomes a giant vagina-lip ready to swallow the gullible and curious male protagonist’s head. Neither is the juxtaposition of food and decay stunningly new, especially if one thinks of Greenaway’s *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985) and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989). On the East European terrain, Jan Svankmajer’s recent films come to mind: *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996), a surrealist treatise about murder and consumption, and *Little Otik* (2000), in which a folk character, the insatiable tree-root baby-monster, comes alive to eat his entire family. But *Hukkle* offers a specific local variation on the allegory of murder-by-consumption by placing it in the context of a silent, zombie-like

Hungarian village, where there is an evident gender distribution at work: the murders are all committed by women against men. Most reviews of the film avoided tackling the gendered nature of this conspiracy. It is precisely this silence about gender that indicates that this may be a systematic silence, which hides the least consciously processed register of the film, and which takes a “strong reading” to break.

Women in the village feed and nurture, as they also gather, hunt and kill. Men, on the other hand, play, fish, sit, sleep, are fed by women or are taken by them to see the doctor. Women appear strong and determined, while men seem invariably feeble. This reverses the traditional gender structure that all nationalisms depend on, where men are the active agents and women the passive bearers of tradition, an unequal distribution that defines the scope and space of action for each sex.<sup>18</sup> East Central European nationalisms have preserved the traditional hierarchy of gender roles in an especially rigid form. What does *Hukkle*’s provocative reversal of these roles have to do with nationalism or contemporary post-socialist societies?

Since men appear idle, frail, dependent, and often plain repugnant – with the arguable exception of the policeman, one of the few male survivors—the women’s frustration with them seems fully justified. We watch the shepherdess return to her house after a day’s work and wake up three men of various ages, who are all sleeping in one bed for no apparent reason, as they do not appear sick or invalid. We watch her perform a thankless and mind-numbing chore: heating up leftover stew and doling out portions to the men. Her only consolation is in the headphones that connect her to a media world of sounds somewhere on the outside. An old woman, whom we identify in one of the very first scenes as the gatherer of the poisonous white flowers, nurtures a vegetating husband. We watch her silently kill and pluck a chicken and prepare a meal for her urban visitors. After she serves her guests, she puts the rest of the dinner into a blender and purees it into mush that the old man is able to swallow. First, however, she puts a few drops of the mysterious white liquid into his drinkable meal. Another man returns from his day of poaching to a disheveled house full of females—a wife and five daughters. They watch hungrily and resentfully as he eats his dinner alone, while the camera surveilles his digestive action through a penetrating X-Ray-like shot. The medical association connects this scene with one in which women accompany their pale and emaciated husbands on a visit to the local doctor. The wives stand in the waiting room while the men sit; yet we know from previous scenes that they know more than anyone else does about the men’s sickness.

The allegorical register of this gendered conspiracy is fairly specific to the conditions of the East Central European transitions. It sensitively reflects on the fact that the transitions have undermined traditional masculinities which were sanctified, precisely, by nationalism, and were grounded on a strict gendered division between public and private labour. The crisis of nationalism under pressure from global economic and cultural influences set in motion a crisis of masculinity, which unleashed a conservative backlash directed primarily against “strong” career women



who defy naturalized gender hierarchies and take on public responsibilities at the expense of motherhood. This drama has played out along similar lines in every post-socialist country, culminating around contentious issues such as abortion, women's parliamentary representation, and various social policies affecting women. The European Union's recommended policies of gender equality have significantly aggravated gendered social tension. In media depictions, women's recent empowerment has often been represented as a voracious appetite with sexual overtones, as a hunger to consume products, positions, and men. At the same time, men's anxiety over recognizing that consumption is feminizing the nation and that taken-for-granted "national" manhood has fractured into various performances of masculinity has been represented as the disappearance of "real men."<sup>19</sup>

Before we conclude that *Hukkle* is making a feminist statement, however, we should remember the fact the women in the film are not represented as simply powerful; they are monstrous murderers. They act like automata, as if they were programmed by an invisible remote control. If the irresistible mechanism of global consumption that has come to replace more familiar forms of political oppression is the ultimate evil in the film, consumption is also linked with evil femininity. It is women to whom most advertisements are addressed; they are the allegorical agents of the new order, empowered and turned active criminals by the power channeled through them by media globalization. Feminists such as Ann Douglas and Tania Modleski have persuasively contested the hierarchical conceptual opposition between passive, feminine consumption and active, masculine production, and have detected a masculine bias in the association between mass culture and femininity.<sup>20</sup>

Such an association, while relatively new in East and Central European representations, is also fuelled by a gendered class anxiety about the loss of European high art's prestige. Pálfi's eclectic, genre-mixing aesthetic strategy seems to resist the elitist hegemony of ideal meaning. However, what is passive and corruptive about global mass culture is isolated in the film as part of a female regime, rendered in feminine images. Pálfi's strategy is similar to Baudrillard's, who, Tania Modleski argues, describes the feminized masses as a "gigantic black hole" outside of language, meaning, representation and politics while he celebrates the revolutionary potential of mass culture. Similar to woman in psychoanalysis, Modleski writes, the masses can no longer be spoken for, articulated, represented in the collapse of sociality, the end of both the public and the domestic sphere, which characterizes Baudrillard's model of simulation.<sup>21</sup>

The metaphysical aspect of female monstrosity is not to be ignored here. The film's flirting with Hollywood genres encourages associations between the poison-brewing female conspiracy and the figure of the witch, a recurring representative of the monstrous feminine in horror films. Where exactly the source of power is in the new order of media globalization, if there is such a centre, is only hinted at. Towards the end of the film, the hiccups suddenly stop and the earth begins shaking. The apocalyptic moment is

brought on by an American fighter plane which, according to the script, is coming from the nearby American army base of Taszár. While the film does not claim that the women are agents of a specifically American kind of media imperialism, the local interpretation would make the link unmistakable in the East Central European intellectual climate of intense anti-Americanism.

Whose anxieties underlie the apocalyptic vision of a feminine conspiracy against fragile men in a world where consumption, vaguely associated with the US, replaces communication? What does the policeman realize after the plane charges under the village bridge in a striking special-effects phenomenon? In the last scene of the film, the policeman sits, exasperated, at a wedding table, as the camera pans around to reveal a young, indifferent bride and an oblivious, older groom, and we hear a chorus of village women sing a song about being orphaned—the only other instance besides the TV scene where human language is uttered in the film. What is behind the conspiracy of village women, this least explicit and most confusing layer of the allegory?

Conspiracy is a common trope in East and Central European films, which carry on a Kafkaesque cultural heritage of experiencing modernity as an imprisoning universe with inscrutable rules. Unlike in *The Trial*, *Colonel Redl*, and a host of other East and Central European texts, however, in *Hukkle* there is no hero; and conspiracy is an almost justifiable alliance of hard-working women who otherwise do not appear threatening at all. The kind of feminizing conspiracy that the film represents through an alliance of women has more to do with that in *Videodrome*, *The Truman Show*, or *The Matrix*, where human subjects do not know that they are used, rendered passive, are being force-fed an electronic diet that divests them of communicative agency, and freezes them in spiritual death. But even in the latter two films, there is hope for redemption, for an escape back to reality. *Hukkle* conveys anxiety about conspiracy in the much larger sense that, as Fredric Jameson argues in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, constitutes the logic of the emerging system of postmodernism.<sup>22</sup> The film represents a transition from the Manichean, typological allegory, itself drawing on the Central European experience of existential anxiety captured by Kafka, to an allegory of the national that can no longer think of itself as authentic, truthful, isolated from global postmodernism.

The oscillation between the national and the global as primary conceptual and emotional frameworks of identity is represented in *Hukkle* as emasculating. The film's allegorical structure makes figurative a certain gendered class consciousness specific to Eastern Europe: that of intellectuals who are forced to redefine their earlier taken-for-granted role; who have suddenly slipped behind the economic elite in the social hierarchy, arriving at the position that West European and American intellectuals occupy.

## 6. A New Voice?

Symptomatically, non-Hungarian reviews focused on the unresolved murder mystery, missing or ignoring the film's allegorical registers altogether, while Hungarian analyses



were unable to read the film as other than national allegory with a universal existentialist dimension. The author of a Hungarian review notices the fact that women systematically kill men as “female spiders devour males” but, in interpreting this pattern in relation to a larger social context, he dissolves the gender difference he had just identified within the old national “we,” which he automatically extends to “humans” caught up in the struggle for survival.<sup>23</sup>

The film’s unconventional soundscape provides the most intriguing clue to the film’s formal and political contradictions. East European viewers and fans of East European cinemas worldwide will recognize the national artist’s effort to create something “authentic and autonomous,” qualities that, critics repeatedly lament, are hard to come by in the derivative land of post-socialist cinemas. A Hungarian critic, in his evaluation of the less-than-stellar film crop of the late 1990s, declares that in order to create free and autonomous artistic fiction, one needs “absolute hearing.” In *Huckle*, the modernist-romantic, masculinist urge to flaunt the genius’s super-human hearing is tamed by a degree of humility before the new, all-devouring black hole of postmodern media capitalism.

The film’s use of sound bites is characterized by this ambiguity between hubris and humility. Do the sound effects create true, progressive heteroglossia in the Bakhtinian sense of socially generated contradictions, which constitute the subject as the site of competing discourses and voices?<sup>24</sup> Is the purpose of privileging sounds then to suppress the modernist gaze, associated with the claim to authenticity? Or does the emphasis on the technological manipulation of noises and images create a “pseudo-polyphonic discourse” in the manner of television commercials?<sup>25</sup> Does bypassing human language mean renouncing the truth-seeking effort of historical

films as it does, for instance, in *Latcho Drom* (1993), Tony Gatlif’s film about Romany history told entirely in musical vignettes? Does Pálfi’s listening subject assume historical “response-ability” instead of the grudging historical responsibility of the national artist called on to reify an abstract truth?<sup>26</sup> Does Iain Chambers’s description of the postmodernist, listening subject describe the viewer addressed by Pálfi’s film?

**In the dispersal of a single History, whose omniscient word legislates the world, I begin to hear composite voices crossing and disturbing the path and patterns of the once seemingly ineluctable onrush of ‘progress’. In the movement from concentrated sight to dispersed sound, from the ‘neutral’ gaze to the interference of hearing, from the discriminating eye to the incidental ear, I abandon a fixed (ad)vantage for a mobile and exposed politics of listening—for a ‘truth’ that is always becoming.<sup>27</sup>**

The politics of listening remains ridden with ambiguity in the film. The act of listening is foregrounded, but the “speaking” human subjects remain silenced, objectified. Many of the noises are generated by the playful filmmaker himself. Whereas many films of the 1980s were enwrapped in explicitly male intellectual experiences of compromising with oppressive powers, in the world of *Huckle*, the artist hides behind the allegorical, silenced character of an old villager. But the structural contradiction of the allegorical form foregrounds the ambiguity of his mission: analogical distance from the character also implies the recognition of similarity to the character. The artist, no longer sponsored by the state and justified in his role as the romantic voice of the nation, is feminized by a culture that forces him to promote and sell

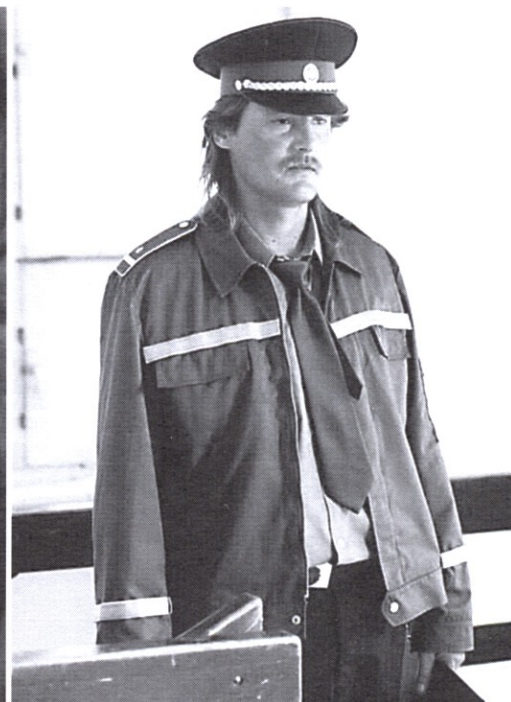
Lily-gathering: herbal medicine or deadly conspiracy in *Huckle*?



*Huckle*: the hiccuping old man



*Huckle*: the investigator







himself with audio-visual tricks and clever websites.

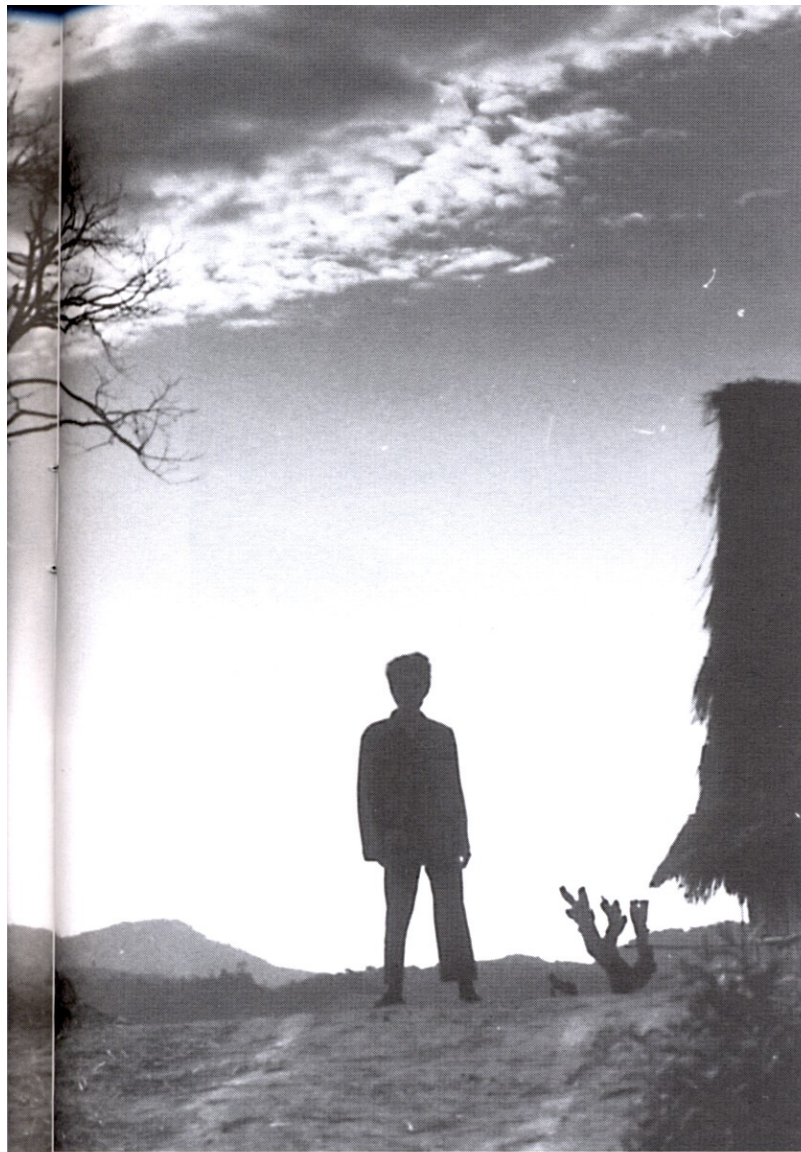
Rey Chow's reading of *King of the Children* (Chen Kaige, 1987), based on a novel of the same title by the Chinese writer A Cheng (1984), sheds analogical light on the gendered plight of the national artist. In the film, a young man, Lao Gang, comes to an isolated, rural school to be a school-teacher—much like Pálfi's invisible urban observer, the director's alter ego, gains access to the life of Ozora. Both films are concerned with the struggle of the intellectual class for self-definition among hostile circumstances. In both cases, this class redefinition is short-circuited by what Chow calls the narcissism of the male intellectual. Chow redefines the psychoanalytic description of narcissism, which Freud primarily applied to female patients, as "an effect of cultural marginalization or degradation".<sup>28</sup> She argues that Lao Gang bypasses the sexuality represented by actual women in favour of "men's play," the male child, and a bond with nature. Like many other characters in contemporary Chinese film and literature, he is self-absorbed, passive, and thus "feminine," characteristics that Chow reads as symptoms of the symbolic impotence of Chinese male intellectuals, who are reluctant to perform their national duty of symbolic cultural procreation in post-

Cultural-Revolution Chinese culture.<sup>29</sup>

Chow's analysis applies to post-Soviet East Central European intellectuals by analogy. The intellectual's loss of power is more complete and self-conscious in *Huckle* than in *King of the Children* or in earlier East Central European films,<sup>30</sup> however. Lao Gang idealizes nature and actively rejects women, evoking a form of solidarity with the viewer. Chow argues that there is power to be gained from observing powerless male figures. "If the construction of national culture is a form of empowerment, then the powerless provides a means of aesthetic transaction through which a certain emotional stability arises from observing the powerless as spectacle."<sup>31</sup> This statement casts doubt on the hiding artist's use of unsuspecting villagers in his intellectual, allegorical film. But it is questionable whether the power gained from observing the powerless evokes solidarity and nurtures the illusion of a national community.

The community that *Huckle* addresses is the audience of international film festivals. While it would be too bold to claim that the film provides a new model for post-socialist filmmaking, it brings a new kind of energy to the world cinema scene because it is uninterested in categorizations such as "national" or "regional" while it continues ways of





filmmaking and philosophical trends rooted in local tradition. Its innovation is in incorporating various genres and conventions in a meaningful blend, which foregrounds the coexistence of the familiar fear of totalitarianism and a more postmodern, shapeless fear of global conspiracy. If *Huckle* is a model for East European filmmaking, it is one in that it abandons (mixes) both routes that post-socialist filmmaking has followed in the last fifteen years: neither does it continue to lock film production in high modernist art, nor does it cynically satisfy audience desires for entertainment. Perhaps most important, its innovative combination of styles and philosophies and fresh response to shifting post-socialist experiences call for a similarly flexible critical-theoretical attitude able and willing to rethink how to address East and Central European films.

**Anikó Imre** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam, completing a book about post-socialist identities in relation to media globalization. Her writings have appeared in *Screen*, *Camera Obscura*, *Framework*, and other publications, and she is the editor of the forthcoming *AFI collection*, *East European Cinemas in New Perspectives* (Routledge).

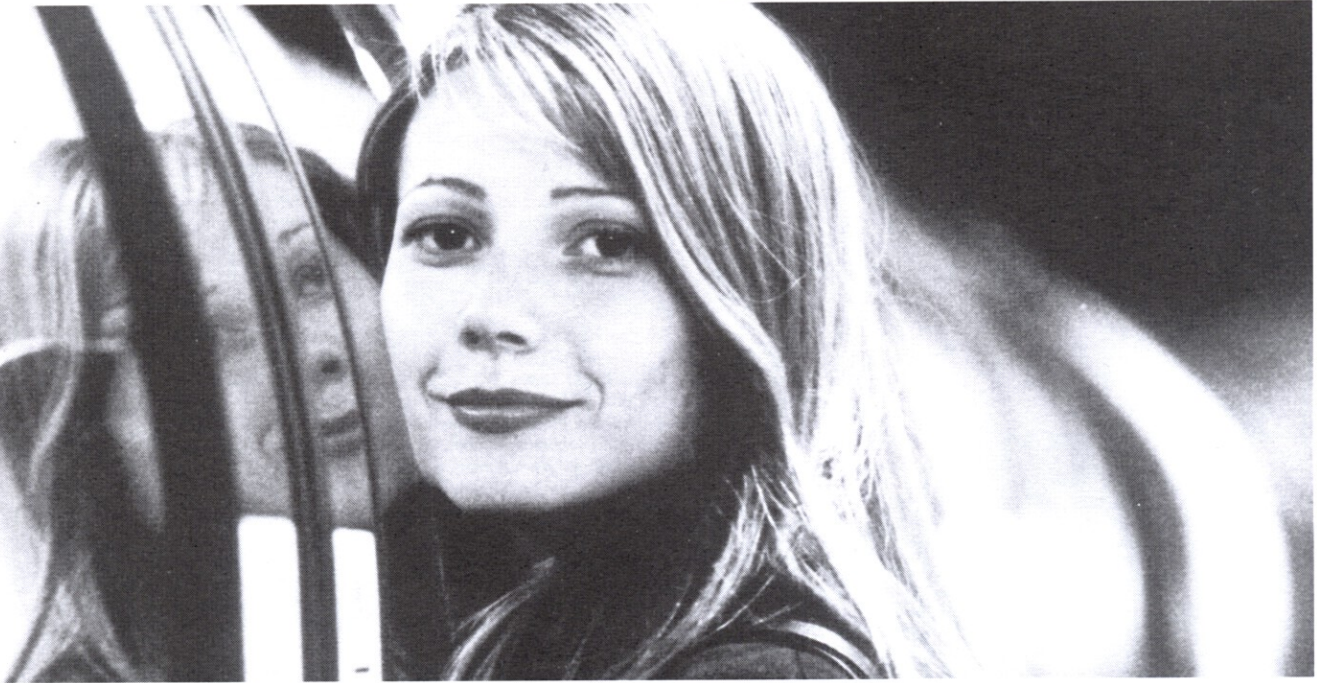
## King of the Children

### NOTES

- Geographical designations have escaped classification since the end of the Cold War; most of my remarks in this writing refer to the area that includes Hungary, the former Czechoslovakia, and Poland.
- See Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*. London: Wallflower Press, 2003. pp. 47–48.
- Some examples of this debate are Ákos Szilágyi, "Tájkép Filmszemle után." ("Landscape After the Annual Film Review." *Filmvilág* 40.4 (April 1997), pp. 4–8; Balázs Varga, "Külön utakon." ("Different Ways.") *Filmvilág* 42.5 (May 1999), pp. 10–12; Klára Muhi, "Yuppie-k legyünk vagy szabadok?" ("Should We Be Yuppies or Free?") *Filmvilág* 42.5 (May 1999), pp. 4–7.
- Katharine F. Cornell, "After the Wall: Eastern European Cinema Since 1989." *Cineaste* 19.4 (1993), p. 43.
- Molnár, Bálint. "Magyar Filmes Marketing". . ("The Marketing of Hungarian Films.") <http://www.magyar.film.hu> Accessed 3/17/2004.
- See Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*, London: Wallflower Press, 2003, pp. 102–106.
- Ibid.*, p. 105.
- Neil Young, "Huckle." <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/huckle.html>.
- Madsen pp. 140–145.
- Stephen Slemon, "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23.1 (1988), p. 158.
- In Gábor Bódy's films or in a number of experimental films produced in the Béla Balázs Studio in Budapest. See Loránt Stóhr, "Mire, mire való ez a fejlesztés?" ("What is, what is this development for?") <http://www.magyar.film.hu/archiv>. Accessed on March 17, 2004. András Forgách, "A későromantika előérzete." *Filmvilág* 39.2 (1996): pp. 4–7.
- See Slemon, p. 57; Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*; Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," *October* 12 (Spring 1980).
- Reda Bensmaia, "Postcolonial Nations: Political or Poetic Allegories?" *Research in African Literatures* 30.3 (Fall 1999): p. 153.
- Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981. p. 35.
- Ibid.*, p. 59.
- Bensmaia p. 163.
- Slemon pp. 161–162.
- See, for instance, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- See, for instance, Galambos K. Attila, "Női vonalak." *Filmvilág* 42.7 (1999), pp. 22–23; Zsófia Mihancsik, "A láthatatlan nem: Magyar nők filmen." *Filmvilág* 47.7 (1999): pp. 16–21; Cranney, Brenda et al., eds. *Woman in Central and Eastern Europe*. *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la femme* 16.1 (1991); Eisenstein, Zillah. "Eastern European Male Democracies: A Problem of Unequal Equality." *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*. Eds. Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller. New York: Routledge, 1993. pp. 303–330; Berry, Ellen E., ed. *Post-communism and the Body Politic*. New York: New York UP, 1995; Goven, Joanna, "Gender Politics in Hungary: Autonomy and Antifeminism." in Funk and Mueller, *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe*. pp. 224–240.
- Tania Modleski, "Femininity as Mas(s)querade." In her *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age*. New York: Routledge, 1991: pp. 23–34; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Knopf, 1977. See also Ien Ang and Joke Hermes. "Gender and/in Media Consumption." *Mass/Media and Society*. Eds. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch. London: Edward Arnold, 1991: pp. 307–328.
- Modleski pp. 31–32.
- Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992. See especially pp. 9–35, including a detailed discussion of *Videodrome*.
- Attila Solyom, "Zajok szimfóniája" ("Symphony of Noises"), *Filmkultúra*. <http://www.filmkultura.hu/2003/articles/films/huckle.hu.html>. Accessed on March 17, 2004.
- See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. London: Routledge, 1994. pp. 215 and 315.
- Ibid.*
- Iain Chambers, "Signs of Silence, Lines of Listening" in Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 51.
- Ibid.*, p. 51.
- Rey Chow, "Male narcissism and National Culture: Subjectivity in Chen Kaige's *King of the Children*." *Male Trouble*. Ed. Constance Penley and Sharon Willis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. p. 109.
- Ibid.*, p. 111.
- See Anikó Imre, "Central European Culture Today and the Problematics of Gender and Poetry." *Comparative Cultural Studies and Central European Culture Today*. Steven Tötösy, ed. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2001: pp. 71–90.
- Ibid.*, p. 109.



# Two Stories, One Right, One Wrong



## NARRATIVE, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND GLOBALIZATION IN *SLIDING DOORS*

BY DAVID MARTIN-JONES

*Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1997) was one of several films to emerge in the late 90s that showed two or more versions of the same narrative. It presented alternate incarnations of its protagonist, Helen/Gwyneth Paltrow as though they existed in parallel universes. Yet, despite its slightly unusual dual narrative, the way in which *Sliding Doors* constructs national identity is hardly original. It uses its two versions of the same story to offer two contrasting views of national identity in 90s Britain, and asks the viewer to choose between them. Should we be in any doubt as to which is the "correct" narrative outcome, the choice is clearly signposted for us by the film. In fact, this device is really only a variation on classical narratives like *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946). As Frank Krutnik<sup>1</sup> has shown, in Capra's film, a specifically weighted choice was offered to American servicemen returning from WWII. National identity was allowed two possible routes, either a return to the small town values of Bedford Falls (the "right" outcome), or the soulless *noir* landscape of Pottersville (the "wrong" outcome).

However, although it uses the same technique, *Sliding Doors* strongly advocates an identity that is far more globally oriented than national. Despite emerging at the time of devolution in Britain (the establishing of separate parliaments in Scotland and Wales) the film is far less concerned with the splintering of British national identity than it is with the relationship between London and the rest of the world. *Sliding Doors*, then, uses its multiple narrative structure to explore the changing face of British national identity after the development of London as a global city. In fact, by mapping the "right" and "wrong" ways of living in the global city the film proffers an image of a new, *transnational* identity in post-devolutionary Britain.

This work will illustrate the various ways in which *Sliding Doors* uses its multiple narrative



structure to offer its biased choice of identities, especially through the use of crosscutting, soundtrack, montage sequences, flashback, two contrasting genre styles, two alternative personifications of Paltrow's star persona, and an allegorical use of heterosexual gender roles usually associated with female makeover films. An analysis of these techniques will illustrate the ways in which the alternatives they create have been carefully chosen to coincide with the film's political agenda. It will be seen that, beneath its apparently playful "Cinderella in the labyrinth of time" narrative, *Sliding Doors* asserts that it is actually the economic conditions provided by the global city that offer the chance of a new identity. Its multiple narrative structure therefore functions as part of a more general renegotiation of national identity in contemporary Britain, a renegotiation brought about by the changes globalization has wrought on the nation, and especially its capital, over the last twenty five years.

I will conclude by briefly examining the same process in two other such films, *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998) and *Too Many Ways to be Number One* (Wai Ka-Fai, 1997). This will also enable a reconsideration of David Bordwell's recent attempt to group together these and other multiple narrative films, based solely on their formal similarities.

### British Cinema

At this point a brief plot synopsis is in order. *Sliding Doors* is the story of Helen, a young woman living in London, whose identity splits into two separate paths through time. After arriving at work one morning to discover that she has been fired from her job in public relations, Helen attempts to return home on the London Underground. In one story she catches the train, but in the other, she misses it. The rest of the film is concerned with her two simultaneous existences. In one incarnation the Helen that catches the train returns home to find that her boyfriend, Jerry/John Lynch has been cheating on her. She leaves him, and rebuilds her life, aided by James/John Hannah her new love interest. Helen meets James on the tube which her other self failed to catch. After an initial makeover in which she has her hair cut short and dyed blonde, this Helen becomes a successful business woman, running her own PR company. In her other incarnation the Helen that misses the train remains ignorant of Jerry's infidelity, and is forced to work in two rather menial jobs, as sandwich deliverer and waitress. She remains completely unaware of the existence of James. For brevity I shall refer to the two incarnations as those of blonde and brunette Helen.

*Sliding Doors* has already attracted some critical attention. Two of the most recent edited collections on British cinema, *British Cinema in the 90s*, and *British Cinema Past and Present*, contain a number of chapters discussing British cinema's recent renegotiation of representations of national identity in post-Thatcherite, and now, Blairite Britain.<sup>2</sup> Several theorists emphasize how the changing face of the British economy (from an industrial-manufacturing, to a services base) has been examined in cinema. Subsequently, numerous films of the nineties are explored in order to uncover exactly what has happened to our sense of the

nation in such a context. As *Sliding Doors* is a typical film in this respect, it does not pass without comment. Moya Luckett, for instance, states that:

... *Sliding Doors* indicates that national identity requires some "authenticity", despite its ultimate endorsement of glamour, the superficial and the magical. After all, Gwyneth Paltrow is American, and despite her appearance in films like *Emma* ... and *Shakespeare in Love* as the "quintessentially British" heroine, her star image undermines her authenticity. Consequently, *Sliding Doors* attempts to find the truth of the nation rest on supporting characters who all have strong regional identities (James is Scottish; Helen's best friend Anna is Irish; and her two-timing fiancé, Jerry, is played by Irishman, John Lynch). This leaves a vacuum at the centre of the nation: in a London where there are no native Londoners. This suggests that national identity is always elsewhere, a paradox that seems to be echoed in the current efforts of audiences to find the nation in the images of British cinema.<sup>3</sup>

In films like *Sliding Doors*, any sense of a unified nation has dissipated into the image of a regional assembly of identities, apparently constructing a national identity so far "elsewhere" that it encompasses nearly all of the newly devolved countries of the United Kingdom, and even the Republic of Ireland! If we are looking for a traditional sense of "British" identity in *Sliding Doors*, Luckett's work suggests, it is unlikely that we will find it. Nor is the influence of globalization on this recasting of the nation lost on these contemporary writers. Claire Monk, for instance, points out that many British films of the nineties aim to, "promote a global perception of Britain as a competitive and innovative enterprise economy, thus enhancing its industrial prospects in a global capitalist free market."<sup>4</sup> The reason for the lack of Londoners in the London of *Sliding Doors*, then, can be seen to be primarily due to the swing from an industrial-manufacturing to a services based economy, and to the nation's subsequent attempts to sell itself anew in the global market place.

However, whilst the above debate functions as an informing backdrop to this essay, I contend that the "vacuum at the centre of the nation" observed in recent writings on British cinema is also indicative of a slightly different view of London contained in *Sliding Doors*. This apparent absence is only seen as such if we persist in searching for images constructive of a recognisable, British national identity. If we alter our focus somewhat, and engage with the film's portrayal of London as a global city, then rather than an absence of national identity, we find instead the presence of a slightly different type of identity. As we shall see, the film's multiple narrative structure, and the choices it offers, is crucial in negotiating this changing conception of national identity.

### London: Global City

As a film based in London, *Sliding Doors* exists in relation to a great many other films set in the capital over the last





New London's "haves" and "have nots" prefigured in *The Long Good Friday*.

twenty-five years. It has particular resonance, however, when viewed in relation to a small number of other films that represent London's role in the global economy. Perhaps the most well known precedent in this respect is, *The Long Good Friday* (John MacKenzie, 1979). Here plans to redevelop London's Docklands with the help of financial investment from America (plans that went ahead under the Conservative government during the 1980s) are represented in the form of an allegorical gangster thriller. In this case, the troubles in Ireland are seen as the major barrier to such a development of the capital, with the American mafiosi backers pulling out due to the IRA bombing campaign. If we flash forward to the late 1990s, however, the echoes of IRA bomb blasts have been replaced in films like *Sliding Doors*, by the gentrified splendour of a post-Thatcherite London. Here the changes seen to be immanent in *The Long Good Friday* have been implemented, the services economy is in full swing, and British foreign policy in Ireland takes a back seat to the selling of a Blairite vision of London.

In fact, *Sliding Doors* is not alone in its focus on London as the physical realization of the nation's identity. Several other recent British films have depicted London's services industry as the answer to the decline of communities in various parts of the north of England. *Billy Elliott* (Stephen Daldry, 2000), for instance, illustrates the move from one to the other in extremely unproblematic terms. The future of its protagonist is assured, despite the ruination brought to his Northern community by the closure of its coal mine, in his move to London to study ballet. Coming as it does after the rather more critical stance on London of two of its

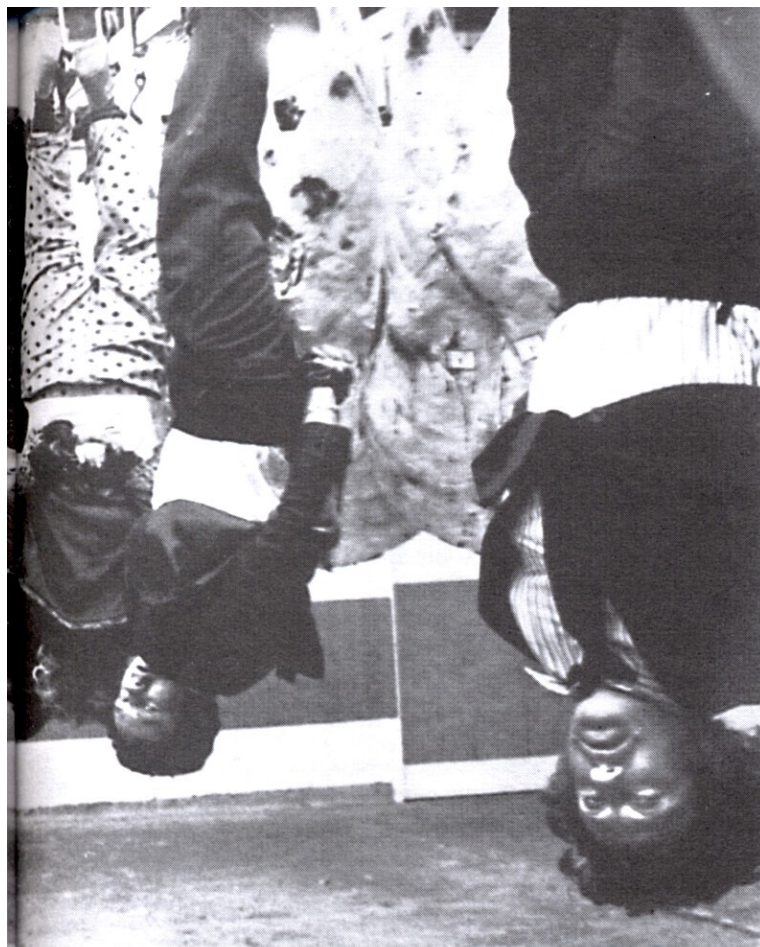
immediate predecessors, *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1995) and *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996), the upbeat ending of *Billy Elliott* has much in common with the late 90s, New Labour-styled spin on centralized national identity that is also seen in films like *Sliding Doors* and *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999).

In this context, the dual narrative of *Sliding Doors* is particularly telling. Its two stories illustrate the right and the wrong ways to live in this new global city. It maps the spaces of London, providing two alternate routes to a successful, and an unsuccessful, lifestyle in the global city. In this way the new "do's and don'ts" of "national" identity are played out as a choice between two different, economically defined classes, rendered as lifestyles. This can be seen in more detail with reference to some sociological evidence.

In *The Global City*, Saskia Sassen describes the economic situation facing the inhabitant of the global city as one polarized by the emergence of the services industry. She states:

**Major growth industries show a greater incidence of jobs at the high- and low-paying ends of the scale than do the older industries now in decline. Almost half the jobs in the producer services are lower-income jobs, and half are in the two highest earnings classes. ... other developments in global cities have also contributed to economic polarization. One is the vast supply of low-wage jobs required by high income gentrification in both its residential and commercial settings. The increase in the number of expensive restaurants, luxury**





housing, luxury hotels, gourmet shops, boutiques, French hand laundries, and special cleaners that ornament the new urban landscape illustrates this trend.<sup>5</sup>

This is exactly the polarity between the high and the low paid sectors of the producer services economy which is explored in the double narrative structure of *Sliding Doors*. On the one hand, blonde Helen maintains her position within the higher end of the income bracket. With a start-up loan from the National Westminster bank she sets up her own PR consultancy firm, and establishes herself as a self-employed member of the global city's elite. Working in public relations she provides a lucrative producer service, one of several that is increasingly common due to the global city's centralization of the service industry in London.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, her first major contract is the opening of James' best friend Clive's gentrified, riverside, "expensive restaurant". This choice of location is used to illustrate both the opportunities available to service industry workers like blonde Helen, and the possibilities that exist for the high income workers of the global city to establish their identity through the demonstration (one might be forgiven for saying, the purchasing) of good taste.<sup>7</sup> In the global city, we are shown, the right economic choices lead almost inevitably to the consumption of the lifestyle enjoyed by blonde Helen.

Brunette Helen, by contrast, is reduced to a position of subservience to the more highly paid end of the producer services industry. Unable to find a job for which she is qualified, her only option is to take a lower level wage as a waitress. Thus the film locates her in one of the many low wage jobs that the proliferation of expensive restaurants necessi-

tates. In order to make ends meet moreover, she finds that she needs two jobs, as the cost of living in the global city is so high. To this end she takes the position of sandwich deliverer. This is yet another type of occupation on the increase in the global city, again due to the increase in demand brought about by population intensive, high income "residential and commercial gentrification".<sup>8</sup> The film drives home its message, that this need not be so, and that brunette Helen could enjoy another lifestyle altogether if she so desired, by situating her in the same sandwich shop that she used to frequent when she was herself employed in the commercial business district.

The film's split narrative, then, creates a binary that represents perfectly the division between the "haves" and "have-nots" that now exists in the global city. This is a situation, the paralleling of these narratives suggests, in which it is just as easy to be one as it is to be the other. Nowhere is this message more apparent than in the montage sequence which intercuts between blonde Helen overseeing the opening of Clive's restaurant and brunette Helen waiting in a different, but comparable restaurant. The film's crosscutting between these locations is accompanied by Jamiroquai's "Use the Force", the upbeat lyrics of which include the lines, "I must believe ... I can be anyone", and, "I know I'm gonna get myself ahead". Identity in the global city is what you make it, the film stresses, the financial support structures are in place for anyone wishing to be their own boss, and the services industry provides sufficient opportunity for a wealthy, glamorous lifestyle.

### Flashback

The film's self-conscious play with time is used to emphasize which of the two choices it considers to be the "right" one. In particular, its use of flashback is integral in creating this bias.

Although the two incarnations of Helen are kept separate throughout the majority of its narrative, they are finally brought into contact at the end. The conclusion sees both Helens involved in serious accidents and taken to hospital, where blonde Helen dies, and brunette Helen survives. As blonde Helen dies, brunette Helen has a flashback in which she sees three distinct images of the city. These are, the bridge on which she and James made-up just prior to the accident, the American style diner where they first went on a date, and, finally, the train on which they first met. The existence of these displaced memories within the universe of brunette Helen suggests a very peculiar action that is taking place concerning the construction of identity in time. Their presence can be explained using Deleuze's theory of the labyrinth of time.

Deleuze developed his labyrinthine model of time partly through his exploration of Henri Bergson's concept of duration in relation to cinema,<sup>9</sup> and partly from the writings of Jorge Luis Borges. Of the labyrinth Deleuze states, "the straight line as force of time, as labyrinth of time, is also the line which forks and keeps on forking, passing through *impossible presents*, returning to, *not-necessarily true pasts*."<sup>10</sup> The labyrinthine model is perhaps easiest to understand as the existence of an infinite number of virtu-



al, parallel universes. In these universes are played out the myriad possibilities of every different fork taken through the labyrinth of time. Each bifurcation of the pathway through the labyrinth leads to two "impossible presents", two possible, and possibly contradictory, outcomes to any one situation. This is not, however, a paradox, as the potential for both outcomes always exists virtually, and are always both played out, albeit in different universes, in their respective actual forms.

Anyone gaining an intuition of their existence in this labyrinth of time will, according to Bergson, "compare himself to an actor playing his part automatically, listening to himself and beholding himself playing".<sup>11</sup> Should this person attempt to change their identity in the present a different path through the labyrinth of time will open up before them. As a consequence, or more accurately, *simultaneously*, their past becomes contingent - based upon the actions they perform in the present - or, to put it another way, "*not-necessarily true*".

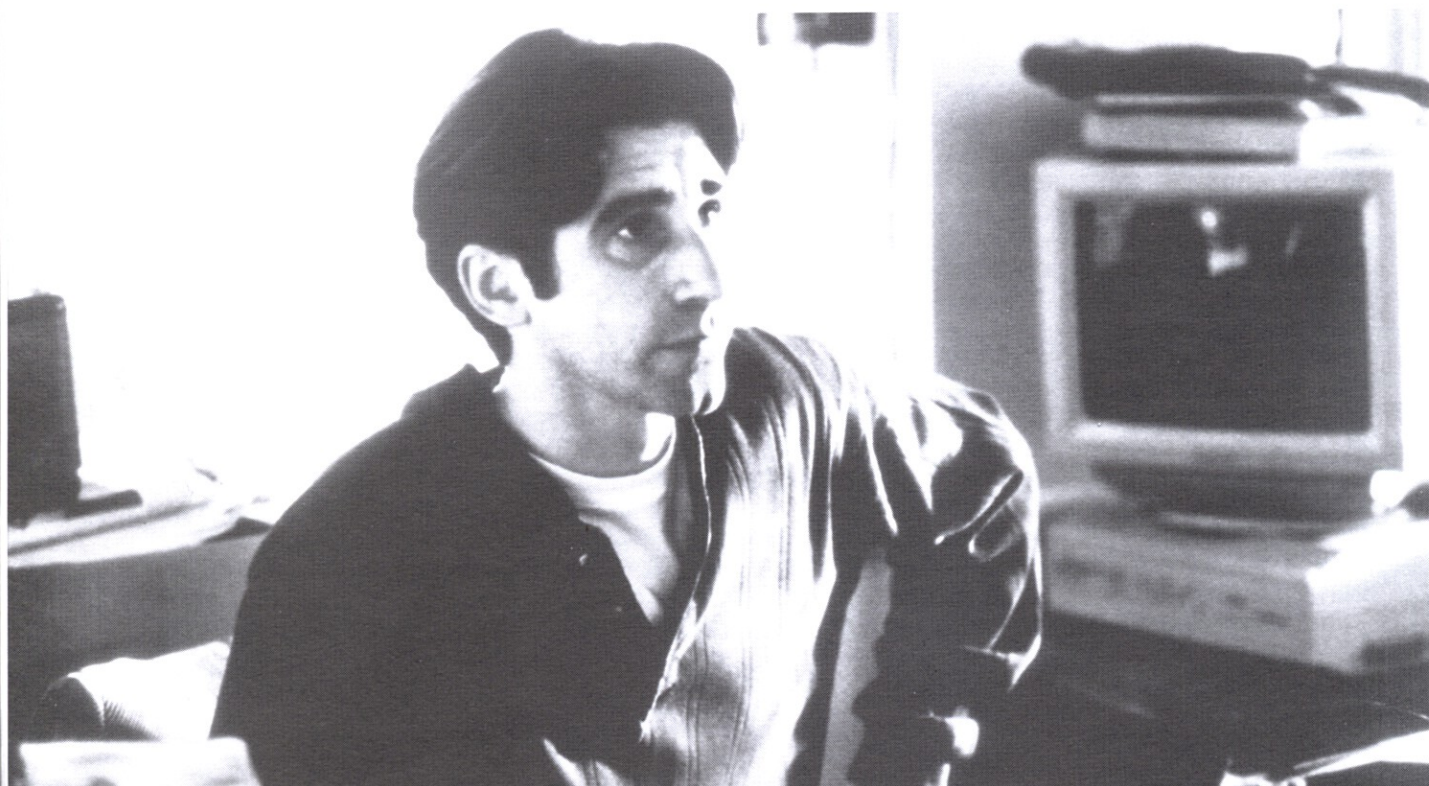
This labyrinthine sense of self can be applied to the curious happenings of the film's ending. The memories of blonde Helen's life which brunette Helen experiences are a representation of the past that she might have had. The appearance of these memories allows her to make decisions for her future based upon a past which now becomes contingent, or *not necessarily true*. At this point she sends Jerry away, armed with a new resolve based upon memories from the past of her blonde self, and becomes determined to make the past a different story. These events suggest a labyrinthine realigning of time for brunette Helen, from the present, backwards. This is evident in the order in which the places occur in the flashback she receives (from bridge, to

diner, to train) as though blonde Helen's story line was running backwards to the point at which they initially split when boarding the tube. Thus brunette Helen's past is realigned with that of blonde Helen with the arrival of her memories. Brunette Helen, realising that the past which she has lived is not-necessarily true, acknowledges through her actions in the present that many possible pasts exist, and that she is one of many incarnations of her labyrinthine self.

This labyrinthine self is further reinforced by the events that accompany brunette Helen's departure from the hospital. As she meets James for the first time in her brunette incarnation, she correctly finishes his Monty Python catchphrase for him, that which, in her blonde incarnation she had incorrectly presumed would be: "Always look on the bright side of life". In the quirky world of 90s man, James, however, it turned out to be: "Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition". Her knowledge of James' quirk illustrates that she is now fully in touch with her other past, and has the ability to manufacture a future for herself that will make the past that was, not necessarily true.

It would initially appear from this reading that it is the labyrinth of time that actually provides the magical quality necessary for brunette Helen to learn from the memories she receives from the dying blonde Helen. Yet this Deleuzian take on the film is only half the story. In fact, the labyrinth of time is used by *Sliding Doors* as something of a McGuffin. It initially suggests that blonde Helen's success is due to her chance meeting with James, the point at which fate causes her life to split in two. However, her rise to success in the global city is actually shown to be the result of the choices she makes after this chance encounter. Thus, whilst the city is depicted as a space where the chance for

*Sliding Doors*: Jerry, soon to be just a bad memory.





success exists in a way that suggests an initial similarity with the labyrinth of time, the film ultimately argues that success in the global city is not actually determined by fate, but by the actions of those who, like blonde Helen, make their own chances.

With this view of the film in mind, the flashback at the ending of the film appears much more obvious in its intent. It is not solely an exploration of the possibility of self-creation offered by chance in the labyrinth of time. Rather, the gentrified bridge, diner and tube station of blonde Helen's memory are the film's most direct expression of the map of London that it advocates for a successful life in the global city.

### Star Maps

The map offered by the flashback ensures that blonde Helen's narrative is promoted as the route to success in the global city. This map, moreover, is aimed at the two different audience demographics present in the cast of this Anglo-American co-production. These are, both the devolved Britons of the late nineties, and the international, but specifically, east coast, trans-Atlantic viewer. Through the characters it portrays, and the audiences it targets, then, the film is able to refigure national identity in late 90s Britain as a meeting of the global and the local.

In its recourse to the regional cast of characters, the ensemble that led Luckett to conclude that the nation was "elsewhere", *Sliding Doors* appeals to Britain's devolved provincials, be they from the beleaguered ex-manufacturing communities of the North of England, the newly devolved nations of Scotland and Wales, or even from neighboring Ireland. If you wish to enjoy life in the global city, it illus-

trates, your identity does not have to be established through interaction with an English, or even a British, national past. According to *Sliding Doors*, identity in London is no longer determined by its status as national capital, rather, it is a city with links, and more importantly, with an identity, that hails from "elsewhere". Indeed, as the Irish and Scottish characters show through their interaction with the American star, Paltrow, the global city is almost a postmodern fantasy space in which all national pasts are somehow forgotten. Moreover, through Paltrow, the film's Blairite vision of London also aims at the American market. The American star's presence is used to court an international viewer who may be persuaded to visit, or even to relocate, to London. In these ways, and in order to appeal to these audience demographics, national identity is thus refigured as a nexus of the global and the local.

To further its appeal, *Sliding Doors* firmly locates blonde Helen's narrative in certain newly gentrified parts of London. These settings offer a vision of the global city that performs both as advertising for the lucrative tourist market, and as a sales pitch to the transnational worker. Tourism has been one of London's "fastest growing service industries"<sup>12</sup> since the early 80s, both increasing the demand for such services as the expensive riverside restaurant, and, consequently, increasing the number of people in part-time, semi-permanent jobs at the lower end of the income scale (e.g., those waitressing in these restaurants). The film illustrates, then, both the consequences of tourist revenue for would-be global city workers (that they can either get a lot of it, or very little of it, depending on the economic route they follow) and, to the would-be tourist, exactly what is on offer to the holiday-maker in London.

*Sliding Doors*: Helen and James, New London's global elite.





However, the tourist images that we see in *Sliding Doors* are not the typical tourist image we have come to expect of London based films, even though these images are still prevalent in several other contemporary films. For instance, the establishing shots of Trafalgar Square and the merry pearly kings and queens so beautifully satirized in *Trainspotting* are noticeably absent. In this case, the film does not aim to sell what is specifically different about London, its culturally specific tourist attractions, its history or its heritage. Rather, it focuses on those aspects that establish London as comparable with other global cities. What is sold is not cultural specificity, or a sense of an exotic national identity peculiar to England, but rather, the lifestyle of the young, *transnational* professional of the global city. It is for this reason that the film goes out of its way to choose locations that demonstrate the overhaul that occurred in London during the 1980s and 90s. From its expensive restaurants to its converted waterfront warehouse bars, the film reassures the international viewer, there are as many amenities here as can be found in any other global city. It is also for this reason that the native Londoners, the authentic identity of manufacturing Britain are "elsewhere" in this film, their authenticity being contrary to the image of "anywhereness" that a global city needs to represent.

The two different views of Gwyneth Paltrow's star persona that the film offers are also used to illustrate the changing face "national" identity in transnational London. Whilst entirely accurate, Luckett's point, that Paltrow's star status undermines any sense of authenticity she might bring to her role as a young Englishwoman, is actually not in any way detrimental to the film's aims. In fact, as Christine Geraghty has shown, the multiple narrative of *Sliding Doors* can be viewed as an expression of the added

qualities Paltrow's star status enables her to bring to her performance of an English woman. Geraghty notes that, as brunette Helen, Paltrow conforms to the "manners, restraint and control"<sup>13</sup> we would expect of an English lady in a heritage film. However, as blonde Helen she brings her star status to the role as well, adding a touch of what is conventionally thought to be American glamour. The difference between the two performances can similarly be seen to represent the difference between a pre- and a post-Thatcherite sense of identity in London.

As Geraghty points out, Paltrow's transformation is most evident in the montage sequences where "we are invited to look [at] rather than listen"<sup>14</sup> to Helen. Of these sequences, the decoration of her new office is perhaps the most interesting in its selling of the city's spaces through Paltrow's star status. In this elliptical sequence, whilst painting the walls of the office, blonde Helen is depicted in a series of sweaters (grey-green and blue) that match the emerging décor she paints. Thus Paltrow's transformation, from dowdy English woman to glamorous American star is reflected back at her from the very walls of the city. This interaction suggests at once the transformation that has occurred in London over the last two decades with the influx of American money,<sup>15</sup> and, once again the possibilities of self-creation that the city makes possible. Paltrow's transformation thus serves as an allegory for the transformation of London, from dowdy English lady, to the American style "dame"<sup>16</sup> of the global city. For this reason, the lack of authentic, English characters in *Sliding Doors* bears witness less to the "elsewhere" of national identity in the services economy, than it does to the transformation of London's identity that it has facilitated.

Paltrow's star persona is also a direct draw because it has become associated with London's nearest neighbouring



A touch of American glamour, Paltrow as global New Yorker in *The Talented Mr Ripley*.



global city, New York. Due to her New York upbringing and her portrayal of several New York based characters, she is rapidly becoming synonymous with a certain, elite, east coast breed of American. For instance, around the same time as *Sliding Doors* Paltrow played characters in several films set in New York, including *Great Expectations* (Alfonso Cuarón, 1997) and *A Perfect Murder* (Andrew Davis, 1998). Since *Sliding Doors* the link between her own cultured New York upbringing and the characters she seems best suited to playing has become more explicit. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Anthony Minghella, 1999), for instance, she plays wealthy Park Avenue socialite on extended vacation in Europe, Marge Sherwood. Similarly, in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Wes Anderson, 2001) she plays languid upper east side intellectual, Margot.

The multiple narrative is used to show that the correct way to live in the global city is to follow the entrepreneurial life led by blonde Helen. Hers is the lifestyle that matches that of Paltrow's star persona. The incorrect way to live, by contrast, is the dowdy life of unhappy, brunette Helen, whose aspect clearly clashes with Paltrow's star persona. In the "right" narrative, Paltrow most clearly fits in with the film's view of London. In the "wrong" one, as Geraghty's work suggests, brunette Helen represents a more traditionally "English" sense of identity, and as such is a little out of touch with the glamour of the new global city. Finally in this respect, the presence of American actress Jeanne Tripplehorn, playing the other major female character, serves to further emphasize the normality of American professionals working in London's commercial centre. After all, her character, Lydia, is able to move effortlessly between jobs in London and America.

### Melodrama vs Romantic-Comedy

The fact that the corporate video package of blonde Helen's successful narrative is sold as a romantic-comedy (as opposed to, as David Bordwell notes,<sup>17</sup> the melodrama of the dowdier story of brunette Helen) only serves to make it all the more seductive. The presence of James in blonde Helen's narrative ensures that her transformation into a successful businesswoman is all the more appealing by conflating entrepreneurial success with a successful romance. The ending of the film is, once again, exemplary in this respect. The final flashback portrays not only the economic route to blonde Helen's success, but also the narrative of her romance with James. The images recap their meeting on the tube, their first date in the diner, and both their first kiss in the shadow of, and James' declaration of love on, the bridge. James, in fact, is the catalyst behind most of the life changing decisions made by blonde Helen. It is he who first suggests that she start her own company, he who shows her how the leisured lifestyle provided by London's new, gentrified, riverside pubs and restaurants can be enjoyed, and he who introduces her to Clive, whose restaurant opening furnishes her first contract. Without James' influence, brunette Helen, the control version of this lifestyle experiment, remains a relative nobody.

This story of a woman's makeover falls within a tradition that includes such films as *Sabrina* (Billy Wilder, 1954) and *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990). In these films the

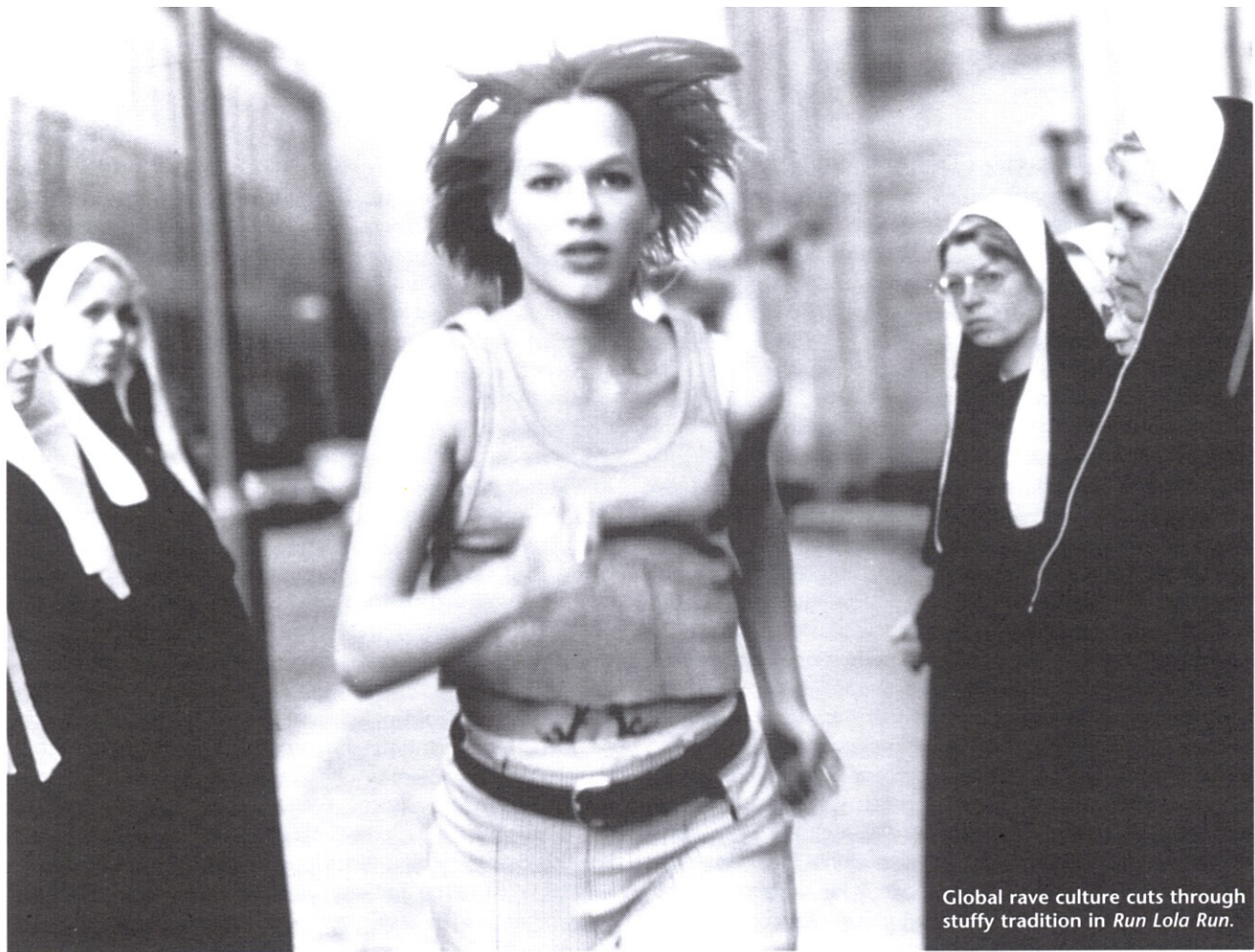
power behind the makeover is often shown to be the financially astute man lurking in the background. Whilst this is also true of *Sliding Doors*, its representation of gender roles is still illuminating in what it illustrates about its context. For instance, as Dina M Smith<sup>18</sup> demonstrates of *Sabrina*, the romance plot of many Cinderella films function as thinly veiled political allegories. In the case of *Sabrina*, the love affair between rags to riches Sabrina/Audrey Hepburn and corporate tycoon Linus Larabee/Humphrey Bogart stands in for Europe's makeover by American investment in the post-war period. In *Sliding Doors* by contrast, the extra dimension to the rom-com narrative is added by the gendered representation of London's services economy as the blonde and brunette incarnations of Helen.

With Britain's manufacturing industry previously coded as masculine in such iconic British films as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), it was little surprise that the emergent services industry, with its emphasis on administrative and clerical professions, would come to be represented as feminine. It was, after all, to address the crisis of traditional notions of masculinity caused by this shift in emphasis that so many British films of the nineties dealt with men adapting to this new environment - e.g. *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) and *Billy Elliott*. For this reason, whilst films like *Billy Elliott* go out of their way to reassure the audience of its protagonist's masculinity as he enters the feminizing environment of the services industry, *Sliding Doors* deliberately foregrounds the femininity of the young professional in the global city. Here the female protagonist represents not only the growing number of women working in the service industry, but also the services industry itself. Whilst blonde Helen shares the same reliance on her man as the female leads of Cinderella films like *Sabrina* and *Pretty Woman*, as a representative of the services based economy the film uses the influence exerted on her by James to stress that the power behind this industry is, whilst still patriarchal, not in any way as interfering as it was when the manufacturing economy was booming.

Noticeably, blonde Helen's romance with James only really blossoms once they are on level terms career-wise. In new London, their romance illustrates, the entrepreneur may want to be prompted in the direction of the small business venture, as Helen is by James, and they may want to make use of their contacts in the services industry, as Helen does of James' friend Clive. However, they do not have to act unless it is in their own interest. Thus the ideal man in *Sliding Doors* acts as a metaphor for the style of government under which the global city of London has emerged in the last twenty years. He is a supportive, but not commanding influence over the small businesswoman.

It is worth remembering, however, that the image of national identity offered by the "right" narrative of *Sliding Doors* is not unique amongst British films of the late 90s. For instance, due to its desire to sell an up-market image of the global city, the casting of *Sliding Doors* depicts a white-washed London that denies its ethnic and racial complexity. This is the same racially suspect gentrification of the population that is also seen in *Notting Hill*. As though taking its cue from *Sliding Doors*, *Notting Hill*'s depiction of the





Global rave culture cuts through stuffy tradition in *Run Lola Run*.

nation through its regional characters (the benevolent English shopkeeper, the Irish thief and the Welsh dimwit) again speaks as much of a nationless identity in the global city as it does of devolved "British" national identity. Moreover, through its vision of a London in which even the most fusty of travel bookstores is fully equipped with the latest security cameras, and where all parks have been transformed into locked, private gardens,<sup>19</sup> *Notting Hill* represents a very similar London to that of *Sliding Doors*. Indeed, its final image, of a contented, pregnant Roberts relaxing in her private park, illustrates much the same use of the star as draw which *Sliding Doors* creates through Paltrow. What sets *Sliding Doors* apart from its British contemporaries, however, is the way its multiple narrative structure appears to offer this view of national identity as though it were a choice that the viewer has come to of their own accord.

### Conclusion

During the late 90s several others films emerged with a dual or triple narrative structure. These included, from Hong Kong, *Too Many Ways to be Number One* (Yat goh chi tan dik daan sang), the German film, *Run Lola Run* (Lola Rennt), the French-Australian co-production, *Me Myself I* (Pip Karmel, 1999), from France, *Epouse Moi* (Harriet Marin, 2000), and from America, *The Family Man* (Brett Ratner, 2000). At present the only attempt to analyze these recent films as a genre is David Bordwell's article, "Film Futures." Citing as predecessors such literary works as Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and O. Henry's short story "Roads of Destiny", Bordwell concludes that it is "folk psychology, the ordinary

processes we use to make sense of the world"<sup>20</sup> that determines the simplified nature of these narratives. Bordwell then proceeds to outline seven of the "strategies characteristic of certain traditions of cinematic storytelling"<sup>21</sup> that have been used to shape the narratives of films like *Sliding Doors*. Most importantly for this work is the fifth category, "Forking Paths will often run parallel",<sup>22</sup> in which he notes that the conventional use of parallel plots is brought to the fore in these multiple narrative films. As we have seen in relation to *Sliding Doors*, it is primarily through this use of parallelism that the choice between national identities is created.

However, although Bordwell's article is extremely useful in the way it pulls together films from such diverse contexts, his approach leads him to some rather ahistorical conclusions regarding the way their narratives function. In fact, Bordwell's focus on genre characteristics ensures that he never really gets to grips with the complex intertwining of class, gender and national identity that occur in these multiple narratives films. As we have seen in *Sliding Doors* the various narrative devices Bordwell identifies are used to construct its biased choice of national identities.

Indeed, all these multiple narrative films can be seen to create a choice of national identities, with the choice rendered differently each time, depending on the context from which the film emerged. Although there is not room here to go into any great detail, two brief examples can illuminate how different national contexts can create different manifestations of this same process. If we consider *Run Lola Run* and *Too Many Ways to be Number One*, although they both use their multiple narratives to tell two or three differ-



ent stories, they offer very different choices, due to the specific contexts of their respective productions.

*Too Many Ways to be Number One* was produced in 1997, the year Hong Kong was handed back to China after one hundred years as a British protectorate. The two stories it offers, of a possible future on mainland China (in which the protagonist dies) and of a more successful trip to freemarket Taiwan (where he doesn't), illustrate the dilemma faced by the population of Hong Kong at this historical juncture. In this respect it is a film that could be productively analyzed alongside Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* series, John Woo's gangster films of the 80s and early 90s, and numerous other films like *Boat People* (Ann Hui, 1982), *Hong Kong, 1941* (Liang Puzhi, 1984), and *Homecoming* (Yan Hao, 1984). As critics like Julian Stringer<sup>23</sup> and Li Cheuk-to<sup>24</sup> have shown, these films use different characters to examine the pros and cons of staying or leaving Hong Kong after the handover, a device which *Too Many Ways to be Number One* extends to its multiple narrative either/or. Thus, although its multiple narrative does offer the typical choice of national identities that characterizes the genre, due to its context of production this choice does not have the same emphases we find in *Sliding Doors*.

*Run Lola Run*, for its part, shares similarities with both of the above, but again it plays these out in a slightly different way due to its context of production. Like *Sliding Doors* it also sees national identity as a choice between private enterprise (figured here as gambling and black market smuggling) and an outdated reliance on the nation (here represented by an unsupportive father/banker). However, this time the city is not seen to be internationally connected through a network of global cities, but through the global rave culture already associated with Berlin's annual techno festival. Moreover, like both the above films, *Run Lola Run* also functions in much the same way as many other films from its national cinema. As Eric Rentschler notes, many such post-Wall films of the German Cinema of Consensus have been criticised for avoiding, "the messy complications of post-wall reality, thematics like right-wing radicalism, chronic unemployment, or the uneasy integration of the former GDR into the Federal Republic."<sup>25</sup> *Run Lola Run* similarly denies the existence of any such problems, and instead provides a unifying vision of Berlin. This effect is most obviously achieved through Lola's running figure, which links together affluent areas of the old West Berlin with strategically chosen areas of newly gentrified East Berlin.<sup>26</sup> Instead of addressing national differences, its multiple narrative illustrates the supposedly right and wrong ways of obtaining commercial success in the capital.

All three films, then, use their multiple narratives to deal with changes to national identity brought on by a recent de- or re-unification. However, they all do so slightly differently. *Sliding Doors* emphasizes the global/local nexus of identity in London in order to avoid the problems of post-devolutionary Britain, *Too Many Ways to be Number One* speculates on the possible ramifications of the immanent reunification with China, and *Run Lola Run* denies the failure of a newly unified present to deal with the recently divided past. As we have seen from these examples, films in

this emergent genre all share the same characteristic, of using the multiple narrative structure to offer a biased choice between different national identities. However, the way in which this manifests itself is different in each film. For this reason, further approaches that attempt to group these films together as a genre should also consider the ways in which they differ, due to the different national contexts from which they emerged.

**Dr. David Martin-Jones** is Lecturer in Film Studies at St Andrews University, Scotland. He is currently writing a book on Deleuze and national identity in time travel narratives. He has articles on Scottish Cinema forthcoming in *The Journal of British Film and Television and Screen*.


#### NOTES

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- 4 Claire Monk, "Underbelly UK: The 1990s underclass films, masculinity and the ideologies of "new" Britain", in Justine Ashby & Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 274–287, p. 284.
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- 14 Geraghty, p. 55.
- 15 Sassen, p. 265.
- 16 Geraghty, p. 54.
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# The Passion of Global Hollywood

## *ivansxtc.*



It occurred to him that what had previously seemed to him a downright impossibility, that he had lived his whole life not as he should, could actually be true. It occurred to him that his barely recognized promptings to fight against what people in the highest positions deemed good, faintly perceptible impulses which he had promptly shrugged off—it could be these that were the reality, and all the rest was not the right thing.

—Leo Tolstoy  
*The Death of Ivan Ilyich*



BY LISA KERNAN

Contemporary Hollywood is marked by contradictions. An endlessly maligned and ridiculed institutional "place" from which emanates a global corporate entertainment culture widely criticized for its uniformity and creative bankruptcy, it is at the same time the presumed origin of a technological transformation in cinema's conditions of production that holds potential for exciting innovations and democratic expansions of the medium. Moreover, the specific geographic Hollywood/Los Angeles area seems an increasingly contradictory space as we enter an era referred to by some as the death, or "end of cinema as we know it."<sup>1</sup> In *ivansxtc.*, filmmaker Bernard Rose (with the help of cast, crew, and Leo Tolstoy) has made these contradictions visible on a number of levels.

One contradictory feature of Hollywood is the annual Independent Spirit Awards, an exciting if ultimately predictable celeb-fest that occasionally, interestingly, includes nominated films so marginally distributed that they are virtually absent from film screens and entirely absent from video stores during their award year. Such a film was Bernard Rose's *ivansxtc.* (2000, pronounced "Ivan's ecstasy"), the first feature film shot entirely on high definition digital video, and currently unavailable on video in North America. It is a retelling of Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, about a man confronting the meaninglessness of his life, in which the character of Ivan is updated from a pre-Soviet Russian bureaucratic functionary to a 1990s Hollywood agent. This essay explores *ivansxtc.*, a movie that is also about Hollywood, as a springboard for investigating textually and contextually, some of the contradictions faced by independent filmmakers at this transformational yet increasingly corporatized cultural moment.

In an era of rapid technological change in which conglomeration has quietly and legally restored vertical integration to Hollywood,<sup>2</sup> and in the midst of a corporate popular culture so enmeshed with marketing discourse as to be increasingly unrecognizable as culture, *ivansxtc.* offers a limit case that maps some of the cultural spaces and performative guises inhabited by films and filmmaking at the turn of the millennium and the turn of the medium. It is an allegorical portrait of, as well as a cautionary tale about, the last-ditch life-support systems in which cinematic innovation is enmeshed in the contemporary Hollywood media industry. By treating the film's litmus-like millennial production and reception contexts as integral to its textual analysis, we are able to consider ways in which the film can be seen to performatively reenact its own positioning in the corporate marketplace. The resulting whole, I argue, enables the film to offer an "eco-tour" of global Hollywood that is greater than the sum of its parts.

This effort to integrate text and context in treating a film at once from, about, and resistant to Hollywood is influenced by Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy's elaboration of the notion of "MediaSpace" in their recent anthology of articles exploring the consequences of the fact that "media ..., and the social processes that shape our

perception and use of space are allied phenomena."<sup>3</sup> Expanding the terrain of discussion for films and other media texts to include aspects of their (institutional and geographical) spatial situatedness increases the amount of information they can provide about the social world. As Couldry and McCarthy argue,

**[u]nderstanding media systems and institutions as spatial processes undercuts the infinite space of narrative that media appear to promise; it insists that our object of analysis is never just a collection of texts, but a specific and material organization of space. Media, like all social processes, are inherently stretched out in space in particular ways, and not others.<sup>4</sup>**

Exploring the ways *ivansxtc.* is "stretched out in space" entails building a case that contributes toward an ecological understanding of the film, encompassing analyses of its conditions of production, its representations of Hollywood space, and the performance of the titular character who inhabits it.

In March 1999, Bernard Rose (a British filmmaker with indy roots whose success with *Paperhouse* in 1988 enabled him to come to Hollywood to make *Candyman* in 1992 and *Immortal Beloved* in 1994) was fresh from enduring a fatal studio recutting of his remake of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* at the hands of Warner Bros. He and girlfriend Lisa Enos went to a demonstration of Sony's High Definition Digital camera, and upon witnessing experienced directors of photography unable to distinguish the digital footage from film, they were persuaded to try out a prototype of the new camera, with which they could make a feature film for the price of a documentary. Rose became a convert to the format, comparing it in his press kit commentary to the revolutionary impact of impressionist painting:

**This is the heart of the digital revolution. Most people are not constantly backlit in real life. At night the "moonlight" does not come from a high crane with powerful arc lights that cast a blue glare as bright as any baseball stadium. Women do not wake up in bed with flawless hair and make-up. Industrial Cinema is a legitimate form—but it is stuck in rigid conventions. Hamstrung by money, like traditional oil painting, industrial cinema has entered its decadent phase.**

**In digital cinema your girlfriend is the star. Your backyard is the set. Your life is the script.<sup>5</sup>**

Rose then penned a screenplay retelling Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* in contemporary Hollywood, and with Enos signed on as producer and friends Danny Huston (the "first and only choice to play the part of Ivan"<sup>6</sup>) and Adam Krentzman (Rose's agent, playing an agent), they enlisted Peter Weller as the film's megalomaniacal movie star Don West, and filled out the rest of the ensemble by casting





Filming *ivansxtc.* with the Sony high-definition video camera (Danny Huston is at right).

"people in roles that were as close to the reality of their lives as possible."<sup>7</sup> Enos reluctantly took on the female lead, Charlotte, in addition to her role as the film's producer, and shooting took place in July 1999 with the Sony HDW-700A HD camera.

The filmmakers were amazed throughout the brief shoot at what they were able to accomplish under available light conditions. Rose comments in his shooting diary, "[a]ll the dead practices of waiting around in trailers and waiting for trucks to be unloaded and waiting for everybody's energy to be sucked out of their soul just do not apply here. It is incredibly liberating." A restaurant scene, for example, was filmed while the restaurant was open with its normal patrons and employees (who signed release forms) going about their business, "literally lit by candlelight." Rose goes on, "we sh[ot] a ten-page scene with eleven speaking parts in four hours."<sup>8</sup> The film was edited on an Avid in Rose and Enos's house that August.

Previously to this moment, Bernard Rose had achieved a certain degree of critical and popular success as a Hollywood auteur following his direction of the Clive Barker-written urban horror film *Candyman*, which inspired

two (non-Rose) sequels, and the Beethoven biopic *Immortal Beloved*. Helping to make all this happen was Rose's agent at the time, the charismatic Jay Moloney of Creative Artists Agency (CAA), whose personality and rapid fall from grace in the industry (when he later succumbed to a cocaine addiction) were in part what inspired the story of *ivansxtc.*, along with Rose's reading of Tolstoy's novella while researching *Anna Karenina*. The November morning the first cut of *ivansxtc.* was screened, the crew got word that Jay Moloney had committed suicide. As Rose explains:

The picture was shot, cut and ready to sell when Jay Moloney was found dead in his Hollywood Hills home. He had hanged himself. I shudder when I think of the despair that must have engulfed him. Life imitated art in so many disturbing ways in the ensuing months. The reactions and behavior of certain people who shall remain nameless were a verbatim re-run of the movie. Suffice to say, CAA no longer represented me, I lost my cushy job at Universal, and *ivansxtc.* spent two years in the wilderness looking for distribution.<sup>9</sup>





Another article provides details about the ensuing impediments to distribution (referred to as “roadblocks” by actor Huston<sup>10</sup>) but the facts are still sketchy as to CAA’s involvement:

**The director alleges that while CAA had previously helped with the movie, even allowing him to film its weekly staff meeting, things seemed to change after Moloney’s death. He says the agency began a campaign against the film that prevented it from securing a distributor for a few years. In the aftermath, he says, he lost his house, his car and assorted possessions. ... A CAA spokesman denies Rose’s allegations.<sup>11</sup>**

The film was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2000, but only gained a brief general release in 2002, when it won the Grand Jury Prize for a narrative film at the Boston Independent Film Festival, was nominated for Best Foreign Film at the British Independent Film Awards, and received acting nominations for Huston and Weller, Best Director nomination for Rose, and a John Cassavetes Award nomination at the Independent Spirit Awards, as

well as garnering a number of positive reviews. Although the film was never released on video in the U.S., the filmmakers self-distributed a DVD from their website for a period of time.<sup>12</sup>

Because *ivansxtc.* has been so rarely seen, a brief synopsis follows. The film begins by evoking the death of Ivan Beckman (from cancer) through a credit sequence of sunrise shots of LA and images of Ivan’s house, sketching out the last moments of his life loosely from his point of view, accompanied by ambient sounds from the death scene that we see at the end of the film. The agency where Ivan works gets the news of his death that morning at a staff meeting, where the incredulity is almost less that he died than that his dissolute lifestyle was not the cause of his death. A scene ensues where another agent placates Don West, Ivan’s client and the agency’s biggest star (Peter Weller), followed by Ivan’s funeral, which erupts in internecine warfare among the agency’s clients. As Ivan’s coffin is slid into its mausoleum, the film flashes back to his final week. The charming, charismatic Ivan gets his annual physical, attends a premiere with his girlfriend Charlotte, and goes to a druggy post-premiere party with West. Ivan promotes two of the agency’s clients by brokering a deal between a star, a screenwriter and a director, in the process nabbing West as a client, a big coup for the agency. He is reproached by Charlotte (herself an aspiring screenwriter) for promoting a bad script that he hasn’t even read. Ivan gets the news that his physical has turned up a lung tumor, and reacts by escalating the partying while attempting to understand and manage his illness by seeing a therapist, getting books on natural cures, and making unsuccessful stabs at telling Charlotte. After a depressing dinner with his family, he ditches Charlotte for an ecstasy party with two call-girls at his house, during which he opens up for the first time about his condition. He passes out alone, only to awake screaming in pain, whereupon paramedics are summoned, he is taken to the hospital, and requires an emergency tracheotomy (which the film presents in graphic detail). Ivan’s final “ecstasy” is a brief moment of loving touch given to him by a nurse in the hospital just before he dies.

The film is fairly remarkable simply in terms of the way it normalizes death. While Ivan is not an entirely likeable character, he is sympathetic on a personal level, and we witness his death twice, once in fairly graphic terms and once from his assumed point of view. Seen as a “Hollywood story,” and moreover because, as I argue, the film’s meanings encompass its production context and situatedness in geographical and institutional Hollywood space, we can also interrogate Ivan’s death in relation to the “death” of Hollywood.

### **Terminal Hollywood (Ivan’s View)**

Cynical filmic portraits of the crass underbelly of Tinseltown are by no means new, and reviews of *ivansxtc.* trotted most of them out, from *Sunset Boulevard* to *The Day of the Locust* to *The Player*.<sup>13</sup> But looking to this level of the film alone shortchanges it, even on its own terms. The opening sequence’s “still lives” of LA and Ivan’s final moments introduce us both to Hollywood and to the look of the high definition digital video image. Quintessential



landmark images such as the Hollywood sign framed by palm trees and marquees along Hollywood Boulevard are rendered neither heroic, nostalgic, nor ugly by the format, but rather like snapshots: not exactly real life, yet kind of regular. In several shots slow motion is used, particularly for lateral movements (a bus going by, a person walking). In high-definition, the slow motion effect is less trance-like than with film—the image appears as successive moments frozen in time.<sup>14</sup> While the cumulative effect of the opening images is decidedly not elegiac, something other than Hollywood-bashing, clearly, is going on.

Living in Los Angeles, as I have done for the past 13 years, gives one a different perspective on historical Hollywood than that gained from the outside. In LA the desire to find the geographical locus of the mythical place is strongly evident in public discourse, and coexists both with moments when that desire seems fulfilled and with a knowledge of the ultimate impossibility of its fulfillment. Technically of course “Hollywood” has been situated in Culver City, Century City, Studio City and Burbank as well as Hollywood proper, and moreover has been institutionally situated in many other urban locales throughout its history (notably New York) even before the sprawl of globalization. But popular culture persists in the use of the shorthand. Furthermore, recent developments in LA, such as the blurring of boundaries between theme parks and malls (Universal Studios’ Citywalk, the faux *Intolerance* set at the Hollywood and Highland mall), and the increased papering

of its exterior spaces with film promotional discourses (such as ever larger billboards, and LED screens playing movie trailers) contribute to a packaging of the nostalgia for historical Hollywood that contradictorily obscures even more the possibility that it might be found somewhere in Los Angeles.

But mythical Hollywood is still teasingly, peripherally, present in LA: a curve in the road on Cahuenga near Odin opens onto an apartment building vista that time-warps you to the sixties Hollywood of American International Pictures movies. A palm frond gracing a facade of Spanish stucco and neon evokes fleeting echoes of the noir landscapes of Billy Wilder. Star sightings and the paraphernalia of location shoots still provide locals with momentary *frissons* of participation in the movietown myth. Indeed Los Angeles architecture itself, always a playground for heightened flights of fantasy and nostalgia, perpetuates an infinite regression into its own history with nostalgic designs such as the aforementioned Hollywood and Highland project, along with recent restoration efforts to preserve Hollywood’s historic movie theaters (El Capitan, the Egyptian) and famous neon signs. The material embodiment of the idea and myth of Hollywood is a lost object that continues to be sought by movie-spectator-tourists, designers, and industry marketers alike in contemporary Los Angeles.

Right from its operatic opening, *ivansxtc.* shows us Hollywood as a different kind of lost object. The credit sequence, with its scene-setting long shots of Los Angeles accompanied by Wagner’s “Tristan and Isolde” and Ivan’s

Charlotte White (Lisa Enos), Ivan Beckman (Danny Huston) and Don West (Peter Weller) at the movie premiere in *ivansxtc.*





voice-over screams of agony, and its ensuing segment loosely depicting what we assume to be Ivan's final trip to the hospital and death from his point of view, confronts viewers immediately not only with a foretaste of the story's culminating death but with a meditation on the fear of having lived a meaningless life. As we see the first images of Hollywood at sunrise, we hear Ivan in voice-over: "Last night I had this incredible pain... the pain wouldn't go away. So I was trying to find an image, one worthwhile image that would get me through it. And all I could find was shit. ..." The images the segment calls up—lingering long shots of a deserted smoggy sunrise over Griffith Park; half-finished billboards on the Sunset Strip; the Chinese and El Capitan theaters; empty roads adorned with palm trees, power lines and sprinklers; chrome and glass business edifices; morning sunlight sparkling through leaves—are not, however, shit. They comprise a bracket syntagma of Hollywood sights: some touristic, some strikingly beautiful, some mundane.

Combined with the operatic music and the screams, and considering the fact that we are being introduced to the implied point of view of a character we haven't yet met, the effect is a Hollywood stripped of the mythic yet imparted with the sublime: a deathbed revelation that transcends place yet ultimately offers us back Hollywood as life-sized. The historic site of so many staged, orchestrated and over-acted death scenes here gracefully offers itself as the setting for our imagined confrontation with a real mortality: at once as momentous and yet as everyday as it is anywhere. Both the Hollywood satires in films such as *The Player* and the nostalgic Hollywood-worship of contemporary popular culture are upended by this opening's representations of Hollywood space as *alive*—and dying.

The everydayness of the way this Hollywood looks is due only in part to the lower-contrast look of the high-definition image. The film's exploratory temporality and ambiguous vantage points contribute as well. We are sometimes clearly meant to see Ivan's world from his point of view, yet the POV shots are more oblique than exact (we are not literally looking from the floor where he's screaming or through the window of the ambulance). These shots moreover follow the series of aforementioned wide master shots of deserted sunrise LA that while not taken from Ivan's point of view, are suffused with his perspective by his voice-over "one worthwhile image" speech. We view these images while contemplating whether the series of shots can be viewed as the "shit" that was all Ivan could find, or whether we might ourselves find therein "one image" of beauty and grace. The sequence does not tell us what to find, but does rhetorically invite us to scrutinize Hollywood for meaning. The lost object that is historical Hollywood here becomes not just sought for signs of its fanciful stature as the dream factory of the classical era, although some of the images clearly evoke that familiar search, but stands in also for the biggest question mark of all. This rhetoric has implications as we view the subsequent shots from Ivan's point of view as well as the remainder of the film. Hollywood's contradictions become a stage, where spectators of this film, having been engaged right from the opening shots in an active

and existential scrutiny of Hollywood space, are invited to interrogate larger questions than the artistic frustrations, petty corruptions and hypocrisies that the plot dishes up.

Likewise, the film's production, by using a technology vastly simpler and cheaper than ordinary Hollywood productions—and having been created at a moment when new technologies have rendered the question of whether art can circumvent business in Hollywood arguably more open than it has been since the early days of cinema—asks some bigger questions just by taking place. Indeed Bernard Rose, who moreover appears to fancy himself a bit of a high-def prophet, takes note of this:

**That [the film] is emerging now [2002] says a lot about the shift in the power balance that the digital revolution is causing. The fact that we are coming out now means that, yes, you can make a film that "they" don't want shown. You can espouse a view contrary to the wishes of international corporations. That we have made it through with a picture that "they" would never have allowed will, I hope, encourage others to point the camera at their own world.<sup>15</sup>**

Here, what "they" don't want shown" is not merely the movie business exposé aspect of the film. This is a time-honored genre, although the film definitely gives it new punch with its critique of the culture of agents (currently among Hollywood's most powerful players). But even more, I would argue, the film's exploration of the naked fact that death happens, even in (and to?) Hollywood, can be seen as a threatening idea to a corporate culture industry reliant upon commercial interests that stress the perpetuation of youth through excess consumption. In any event, the existential questions raised by the film's representations of Hollywood space through the point of view of a dying agent reverberate all the way to its 2002 release and beyond—to the implications of *ivansxtc*'s invisibility in the U.S. in 2004.

### **Performing Hollywood (Ivan Viewed)**

Danny Huston, a director (*Mr. North*, *The Maddening*), actor (*Timecode*, *21 Grams*), and the youngest child of Hollywood titan John Huston ("conceived during his father's production of *Freud* and born during *Night of the Iguana*"<sup>16</sup>), inhabits the character of Ivan Beckman with deceptive ease. During editing, as Rose describes in his press kit commentary, "Danny's performance emerge[d] from the material as a rock at the center of the picture. We cut away everything that [did] not follow his state of mind."<sup>17</sup> By chipping away everything that wasn't Danny, the performance thus grounds the film—indeed, so effectively that Huston not only performs the role, i.e. the character Ivan Beckman, but ultimately embodies his own historical star positioning as well. By this I don't mean the truism that he "plays himself," but rather that Huston as Ivan performatively stands in for global Hollywood's increasingly extreme versions of the film industry's perennial conflict between art and business—an industry that still wants to emulate its parents yet is trapped by the (creatively terminal) exigencies of the bot-





Mourners including Danny McTeague (James Merendino, left) and Barry Oaks (Adam Krentzman, right) at Ivan's soon-to-be-disrupted funeral.

tom line. This idea is moreover literalized in a scene where Ivan is confronted by his artist father (played by his real-life brother-in-law, artist Robert Graham), who disapproves of the shallow life his son has chosen.

Scholarly work on stardom has long emphasized that the meanings of movie stars and their performances always encompass intertextual echoes both of their past performances and of their publicity, as well as echoes of other performers their work evokes. In the case of Danny Huston (baby brother of Anjelica, son of John, and grandson of Walter), the New Hollywood of *The Grifters* and *Chinatown* and the classical Hollywood of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* alike comprise antecedents of his performative coming-of-age. And, as with other "Hollywood babies" like Drew Barrymore, spectators' desire to see family resemblances is an inevitable component of experiencing these stars' work. In this case, even the character's death has a diachronic familial echo, because Danny Huston speaks in interviews of drawing on his experience of his father's death in creating the role.<sup>18</sup>

The problem of how to write about performance in strictly cinematic terms has only recently begun to be given significant scholarly attention. It is an area where analysis tends to fall back on inevitably inadequate description. The introduction to Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros's study, *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* attempts to reconcile this through acknowledging the inadequacies: "By suggesting a realm of textual operation and affective interplay that is both insistent yet elusive and resistant to language, descriptive acts ... awaken us to the uncertainty that all analytical enterprises must deal with."<sup>19</sup> As they argue,

Film ... has a tendency to move away, even as we watch, leaving the movement behind, with us. And sometimes the movement—of actors, of the way actors are moved within the *mise-en-scène*—though unfolding in time is not narrativized, not to be understood primarily through linear analysis or breakdown. What is of interest, what is intriguing, is how movement, voice, gesture can bring about effects, how they can generate affect.<sup>20</sup>

Specifically, Stern and Kouvaros seek a "rhetorical refiguring of particular forms of corporeal presence,"<sup>21</sup> with a goal of approaching performance in order "to open up: a chance or opportunity for performance to be reconsidered and reinvested as a corporeal presence."<sup>22</sup> Danny Huston's corporeal presence is key to the effectiveness of his performance in *ivansxtc.*, because, not in spite of, the absent ghosts he brings along. His presence and absences help us to make sense of his performance in relation to the film's representations of Hollywood space.

Since Ivan himself is absent through the first ten minutes of the film, his corporeal presence is much anticipated. Through the film's opening, we have been introduced to Hollywood as a site of absence and death, leaving us exceedingly (if not morbidly) curious about Ivan. For this reason, and because his (flashback) appearance in the subsequent body of the film, all charm and bonhomie, is layered with a knowledge of his later absence (i.e., death), our investment in his corporeal presence is heightened. In a sense, this heightened presence is no different from that of movie stars in general, for, as noted by Christine Gledhill,



**paradoxically, the star, more overwhelmingly present than any actor can be to a theatre audience, is also not, and never can be, there for the audience to cinema. This poignant "presence in absence" lies at the heart of the desires stimulated by stardom.<sup>23</sup>**

Yet Huston as Ivan layers this poignancy with additional levels of "presence in absence" through the film's flashback structure as well as through the intertextual reverberations of his Hollywood lineage.

The precise nature of the affect engendered by his heightened presence is, indeed, resistant to language. Huston utilizes his Noah-Cross-lanky yet substantial frame and unflappable, cherubic face to deftly incarnate Ivan's persona and the way it fits in to his fast-paced boozy, druggy world. Having witnessed the Hollywood world Ivan has left behind virtually unimpacted by his death in the film's opening, through the flashback structure we then see Ivan on the phone in a doctor's office, clearly charming the person on the other end of the phone and the nurse who fusses over him. These two facts seem incommensurate: how could such a vibrant person have left so little a mark on his own world? This raises, at our first glimpse of Ivan, one of the core contradictions of his performance—and one of the main ways his performance displays Hollywood's contradictions, as a mythical yet real place, equally capable of immortalizing and discarding human life.

We see the agent in action: the normalized lies (at the premiere he insistently compliments the film's producer, who counters, "It sucked," whereupon Ivan deftly backpedals, "You should be proud of it anyway"); the practiced mediation of the currency of small-talk (he introduces the screenwriter to the star's entourage, then compliments the writer's inane sucking-up with a sincere-sounding "Well done!"). The characterization and performance as a whole vivify the appeal that the clubbiness of Hollywood still holds, in spite of our knowledge that it is, in Fassbinder's words, "a holy whore." (Recent images of Democratic California assemblymen unable to hold back ear-to-ear grins as they meet their latest movie-star governor come to mind...)

The scene where Charlotte calls Ivan on his lies and his perpetuation of mediocrity (by accusing him of not having read the bad script he's trying to get filmed) makes it clear that they both know he's a fraud, even as they skinny-dip together and snuggle in the water. This scene is key to the impact of Ivan's corporeal presence on his performance: Charlotte is angry (as a better, yet female, screenwriter, her path is not smoothed-over by the Ivans of Hollywood, however often she might sleep with them), and Ivan cooingly tries to reassure her. She has stripped and is in the pool, and as he opens his robe and unceremoniously inclines his long naked frame into the pool to join her, the clear-blue David Hockney water embraces him in a Hollywood baptism. His body has a sad, yet paradoxically steely vulnerability—the affect of Huston's naked dive somehow bespeaks the contradictory honesty of likeable people in Ivan's position, who acknowledge, even as they perpetuate, the requisite injustices of "swimming with sharks." Danny Huston represents generations of Hollywood celebrity, and here his throwaway

nakedness somehow denaturalizes the desire to be near that celebrity. By displaying the persistence of human embodiment at the "ground zero" of celebrity, Huston heightens the contradiction that Hollywood's vast global and virtual spaces still contain, at their core, bodies that can break and die.

After Ivan gets his cancer verdict, the corporeal center of his performance shifts to his eyes. Fleeing his predicament to Don West's depressing, "provision"-filled party, he gets a perfunctory blow job from a prostitute on a balcony as LA's ubiquitous police helicopters scissor overhead, then is shown making out with another woman under a strobe light. The digital image enhances the freeze of the strobed moments, and for a few frozen frames, Huston's childlike brown eyes look right at the camera, sadly staring down oblivion in jerky, excessive movements that echo silent cinema's expressionistic gestures. The next morning, those same eyes look back at him to rehearse a reassuring Hollywood grin in the visor mirror of his convertible, as he zooms off to another day at the agency after waking up on a blood-soaked pillow. Huston as Ivan performs terminal illness as a teetering Humpty-Dumpty-like ledge, but one where the teetering differs only in degree from that of his everyday Hollywood life.

In addition to the echoes of silent cinema, the conventions of Hollywood melodrama kick in: the camera peers in on a congratulatory hug Ivan gets from his female boss after having signed Don West, as Ivan's eyes close in rapture at the semblance of intimacy he receives: for a moment a Sirkian pathos shines forth beneath his "bit of a rough week" mask. The death scene itself offers the film's most striking cinematic echo, as the tracheotomized Ivan, having scrawled out "Fuck God" in reply to a hospital chaplain's ministrations, receives a moment of grace in the form of a kind nurse who wipes his brow, holds his hand and kisses him on the forehead. Both his beatific acceptance of this gift and his horror at its being taken away when the nurse proceeds on her rounds flash across his eyes in pure silent expressions of interior states of feeling worthy of Falconetti's (and Dreyer's) Joan of Arc. In the end, Ivan is ennobled not by a religious ecstasy but by transgressing the unwritten law of his profession and culture. The passion of Ivan Beckman comprises his acknowledgment of the simplicity of real human need.

The film's narrative structure heightens our awareness at this point in the film of the contrast between Ivan's ecstasy and our memory of the unchanged way the agency goes on (has gone on) after his death. Likewise, the film's conditions of production point up, by way of their simplicity, the top-heavy unwieldiness of Hollywood's vast institutional mechanisms.<sup>24</sup> Through Danny Huston as Ivan, the film marshals the children of old Hollywood to embody its vision of global Hollywood as teetering on the brink: asking whether it might be able, ultimately, to be toppled by the briefest kiss of a new technology that brings cinema back into your backyard.

### **Integrating Text and Context (*ivansxtc's* "viewing-view")**

I have been struck by the fact that in all the discussion surrounding the recent release of the final installment of the technologically ground-breaking *Matrix* trilogy, I was



unable to locate any mention of the film's fundamental plot flaw. A supposedly happy ending comprising a détente with a vast technological intelligence that the film's rebels fight against is morally impossible, in that by using these technologies, the rebels themselves are feeding on the brain-waves of still-enslaved humans. I digress; yet a millennial Hollywood culture that still can't quite let itself acknowledge the extent to which it is consumed by its own excessive technological and institutional needs and greeds is very much to the point. Indeed it is precisely the ecological mirror that *ivansxtc.* holds up, both by existing and by its current absence in our video stores.

In a very real way, a film can only exist by being seen. Vivian Sobchack's phenomenology of film experience describes how the film's "viewing-view" that we conventionally call "the camera" in cinematic description can never wholly be a "disembodied" view. The movements and stasis of the camera as an embodied presence in (here, Hollywood) space and the movements of characters through (Hollywood) space are two commuted aspects of cinematic signification, along with the spectator's experience of cinema, which is correlated with the film's signifying activity. Sobchack emphasizes that

...it is only in the act of viewing that the film is given to our experience as meaningful, and it is only in the act of viewing that the film possesses existence for itself as well as for us. A film can't be seen outside of our act of viewing it, and a film can't be outside of its own act of viewing. ... Therefore, it is the act of viewing that links the spectator of a film and the film as spectator.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, *ivansxtc.* has a life too: in order for the film to accurately see its Hollywood subject matter, it must be seen. The fact that North American audiences are not able to currently see this film renders it (not Hollywood) effectively (if, hopefully, temporarily) as dead as the fictional Hollywood agent through whose eyes this film's "viewing-view" is embodied.

Like the mythical yet real Hollywood that it is about, *ivansxtc.*'s material existence—as something able to be seen—thus contains inherent existential contradictions, leaving the question of whether it represents "new directions" in filmmaking profoundly, even poetically, open. As I write this conclusion, two events have just occurred in global Hollywood: the Carlyle Group, one of the largest weapons investment firms in the world, announced its partnership in a \$2 billion (Canadian) takeover of the Loews theater chain;<sup>26</sup> the same day Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* opened to record-breaking attendance. The stakes in independent filmmaking are higher and more contradictory than ever. As he died, Tolstoy's Ivan (in the opening epigraph) came to perceive that "his barely recognized promptings to fight against what people in the highest positions deemed good" could be the true reality. In the "MediaSpace" of 21<sup>st</sup> century Hollywood, such promptings are getting even harder to recognize. But they are still alive.

**Lisa Kernan** is the author of *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* (University of Texas Press, forthcoming November 2004). She holds an appointment at UCLA as the library's subject specialist in film, television and theater, and serves as a lecturer in the department of Film, Television and Digital Media.

## NOTES

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- 14 At regular speed, some movements leave a strobe-like trail in hi-def, and the slow motion effect may have been used in these wider shots in order to avoid this.
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# Korean Cinema Now

BALANCING CREATIVITY AND COMMERCE  
IN AN EMERGENT NATIONAL INDUSTRY

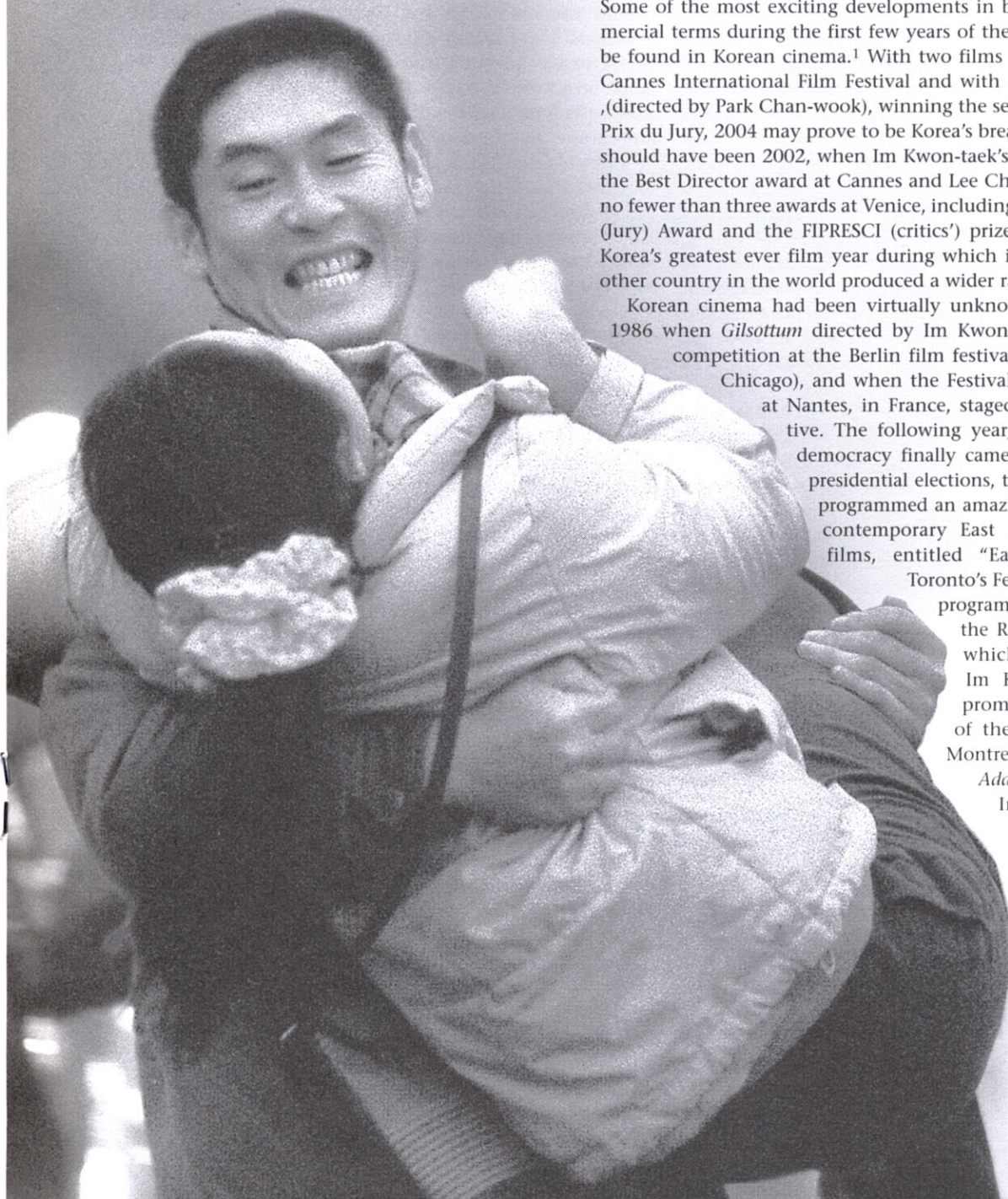
BY PETER HARRY RIST

## Introduction

Some of the most exciting developments in both artistic and commercial terms during the first few years of the new millennium can be found in Korean cinema.<sup>1</sup> With two films in competition at the Cannes International Film Festival and with one of them, *Old Boy* (directed by Park Chan-wook), winning the second prize, the Grand Prix du Jury, 2004 may prove to be Korea's breakout film year, but, it should have been 2002, when Im Kwon-taek's *Chihwaseon* won him the Best Director award at Cannes and Lee Chang-dong's *Oasis* won no fewer than three awards at Venice, including the Special Director's (Jury) Award and the FIPRESCI (critics') prize. Arguably, 2002 was Korea's greatest ever film year during which it is unlikely that any other country in the world produced a wider range of quality films.<sup>2</sup>

Korean cinema had been virtually unknown in the west until 1986 when *Gilsottum* directed by Im Kwon-taek, was entered in competition at the Berlin film festival (and won a prize in Chicago), and when the Festival of Three Continents at Nantes, in France, staged a 13 film retrospective. The following year, 1987, the year that democracy finally came to South Korea with presidential elections, the late David Overbey programmed an amazing retrospective of 37 contemporary East and Southeast Asian films, entitled "Eastern Horizons" for Toronto's Festival of Festivals. This program included 8 films from the Republic of Korea, 3 of which were directed by Im Kwon-taek, the most prominent Korean cinéaste of the 1980s. At the 1988 Montreal World Film Festival, *Adada* (also directed by Im Kwon-taek) won the award for Best

*Oasis*





Actress. This festival has continued to show Korean films on a regular basis, mounting a 9 film national spotlight in 1998.<sup>3</sup> A big moment occurred in 1990, when the Pesaro film festival in Italy mounted a retrospective of Korean cinema, accompanied by a book, *Il cinema sudcoreano*, edited by Adriano Aprà, and this was followed by an even bigger representation of Korean film history at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, from October 1993 to February 1994. At this time no fewer than 85 films were screened and a significant book was published.<sup>4</sup>

The major Parisian retrospective possibly led to more attention being placed on Korean cinema in France than in other non-Asian countries, with *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Positif* regularly devoting articles to the subject and with Korean films regularly being distributed there. On the English language side, it should be noted that Tony Rayns almost single-handedly supplied the anglophone film reader with texts on Korean cinema through the 1990s, and he has become one of the world's greatest film programmers with his *Dragons and Tigers* Pacific Rim program at the Vancouver International Film Festival, which always showcases a number of new Korean films. Over the last few years, Darcy Paquet has done sterling work in promoting Korean cinema through the trade journal, *Screen International* and his English-language website, "The Korean Film Page," <<http://www.koreanfilm.org>>, while a few other journalists, including Chuck Stephens and Derek Elley have joined the ranks of English-language, Korean film supporters. And, finally, a few books in English on Korean cinema are beginning to appear on the shelves, ranging from an academic study on "masculinity" in recent Korean cinema, to a fan's "Guidebook for the Latest Korean New Wave."<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Korean cinema has still yet to find its well-deserved place on the map of World art cinema. One could argue that this is because there has never been a single breakthrough film like Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, which inspired a wave of interest in Japanese cinema with its success at the Venice International Film Festival in 1950, and Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, which sparked the "discovery" of China's "Fifth Generation" with its screening at the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1985, followed by Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* winning the Golden Bear top prize at the 1988 Berlin festival. Surely, this should have happened to Korean cinema in 2002, but neither of the two most likely contenders, Im Kwon-taek's *Chihwaseon* or Lee Chang-dong's *Oasis*, received widespread critical interest or global distribution. However, after a gap of 15 years, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) organized a focus on Korean films, and chose to honor *Chihwaseon* by selecting it as the first Korean film to fill one of the prized 'Gala' slots.

#### **"Harvest: South Korean Renaissance" at the Toronto International Film Festival 2002**

*Chihwaseon* continues in the vein of the bulk of Im's mature work, since *Tchakk'o* (1980) in being set in the past, structured through a series of flashbacks, and shot by the extraordinary veteran cinematographer, Jung Il-sun (or Chong Ilson\*).<sup>6</sup> Apart from its stunning beauty (like Im

and Jung's previous collaboration, *Chunhyang*, 2000), what is most remarkable about *Chihwaseon* is how the life of a late-19th century painter is transformed into a story of rebellion. The artist in question is Jang Seung-ub. The film depicts him as being from the lower classes. Early in his life, he finds a mentor in Kim Byung-moon, who champions his work against the wishes of his associates. Initially copying the work of Chinese classical masters—landscapes, birds and flowers—by memory, after only seeing them once each, Jang breaks out of tradition and finds his own style. He is portrayed as a disheveled *bon vivant*, who believes that sex and alcohol are necessary to support the creative impulse. I am not at all familiar with the work of the actual historical painter, but I suspect that a great deal of artistic license has been taken in this depiction as a way for the director to present himself as being, simultaneously, a "classical" and a radical filmmaker. Im has been Korea's most highly acclaimed director both inside and outside his country for about twenty years now, and, recently, the very first monograph on a Korean director in English was published on his work.<sup>7</sup> His forte has been the exploration of Korean history and culture, and the development of a specifically "Korean" cinema characterised by a more open expression of strong emotions than would normally be found in contemporaneous Japanese and Chinese films, yet sharing these national cinemas' interest in all aspects of visual composition. In this sense, *Chihwaseon* is an excellent example of his (and Jung's) work.

*Oasis* is Lee Chang-dong's 3rd film as a director. His first, *Green Fish* (*Chorok Mulgoki* 1996), a brilliantly acted and written indictment of gangsterism in Korea, won the 5th *Dragons and Tigers* award at Vancouver in 1997. His second film, *Peppermint Candy* (*Bakha Sarang* 1999) displayed an innovative narrative structure, where successive flashbacks go progressively further back in time, to explore the roots of the central character's violent behaviour.

In its love story of Hong Jong-du, a mildly mentally-challenged man, and Han Gong-ju, a woman suffering from cerebral palsy, *Oasis* doesn't have the kind of subject matter which is appealing to me, and, if it were a Hollywood film, I'm sure I would have stayed far away from its assumed maudlin potential. While *Oasis* has a conventional narrative structure, it includes subjective passages which might be termed "magical-realist." The film's title is the subject of a tapestry hanging on Gong-ju's bedroom wall and the elephant, Indian woman and little boy who are included, show up in this room with the oddest of "odd couples" in a later fantasy sequence, when their love relationship is at its peak. Brilliantly, Lee Chang-dong chose to show their developing relationship in idealized fantasy images, as well as realist ones, where Gong-ju, in particular, can be seen by the film audience, momentarily, as physically unchallenged.<sup>8</sup> Moon So-ri, playing both incarnations of Gong-ju, understandably won the Marcello Mastroianni Award for "Best Young Actor or Actress" in Venice for this brave performance which involved incredibly strenuous contortions to achieve the cerebral palsy effect. But she is matched by the less physical but more subtle psychological portrayal of



Jong-du by celebrated film actor Sol Kyung-Gu. Perhaps the greatest achievement of *Oasis* is in getting the audience to be sympathetic towards Jong-du after his initial meeting in the film with Gong-ju when he brings fruit and flowers to her family's apartment. Much later, we learn that Jong-du had taken the rap for his older brother's hit-and-run killing of a road cleaner, and so, retroactively we understand that he is acting kindly towards the bereaving family. But his fascination with Gong-ju leads to his attempted rape of her. She faints during the attempt, and he then revives her under a bathroom tap. The confusion of the film's characters' emotions here and the audience's puzzled responses to their actions is indicative of the narrative as a whole. Gong-ju comes to love Jong-du, and, except for his younger brother, Jong-sae, everyone around them completely misunderstands their mutual attraction, believing him to be a criminal and a rapist. Meanwhile, the film's audience knows better and can fully understand both the plight of the misunderstood outlaw, and the lynch-mob mentality of polite society which *Oasis* allegorically projects.

Among the other TIFF selections were three Korean box

office successes: *Volcano High* (*Hwa-san-go*) which was the 9th highest grossing Korean film of 2001 with 1,687,800 tickets sold; *Champion*, the 5th highest Korean film of 2002, with 1,770,000 admissions; and the surprise hit of the year, *The Way Home* (*Jibiro*), which, at the time of the TIFF was not only the top grossing Korean film of the year, with over 4 million tickets sold, but also had out-grossed all Hollywood films, including the first part of *Lord of the Rings* and *Spiderman*.<sup>9</sup> *Volcano High*, which is set entirely within a fictional school for the "magically and martially adept" was shown, appropriately, in Toronto's Midnight Madness section. It is highly derivative of contemporary Hollywood action/adventures such as *The Matrix* and closely related to Japanese *manga*, even reminiscent in narrative and characterization of the "Lord of the Rings" and "Harry Potter," sagas, films which the director, Kim Tae-Gyun couldn't possibly have seen.<sup>10</sup> And yet, in its timelessness—old buildings, traditional school uniforms, punk, dyed hair, and sci-fi stunts and effects—and look—dark, often nighttime, blue/grey digitally enhanced monochromatic tone with red and yellow highlights, invariably, raining—*Volcano High*



Chihwaseon





*Too Young to Die*

has a striking visual consistency, moments of comedy, and terrific, high-flying action. This is the kind of work that Hong Kong used to do so well with that they dominated the East Asian marketplace, including Korea. Now, it is Korean films like *Volcano High* that have not only captured domestic attention, but Hong Kong and Japanese, as well.

One of the strengths of recent Korean cinema is in its serious exploration of human sexuality. Three of the best films in the TIFF 2002's "Spotlight on Korea" reflect this: *Too Young to Die* (Jugeodo Joh-ah'), *Nakta(dul)* (Camel[s], 2001), and *Turning Gate* (Saeng-hwal-eui Bal-gyun). The most interesting of these in terms of the representation of sexuality is *Too Young to Die*, directed by veteran TV documentarian, Park Jin-pyo. Technically, it is his first "fiction" feature, a DV "docudrama," yet many think it is actually a documentary. In it, a couple in their 70s, Park Chi-gyu and Lee Sun-ye, act out their loving relationship for the camera. Director Park had met them while making a TV documentary on seven older couples, entitled *Love*, and had been struck by their passion for each other. Both had been widowed a few years ago and met at a centre for the elderly in February 2001. They re-enact this meeting, and their time spent together, including an extraordinary 7-minute long take where the camera explicitly, but very discreetly, observes their lovemaking. I was fortunate to see *Too Young to Die* with a Korean audience at the 2002 Jeonju International Film Festival. Remarkably, although the vast majority of this audience was in their teens and twenties, they enjoyed the experience immensely. On the other hand, one film scholar I talked to found the film to be really exploitative of the septuagenarian subjects. But in an interview with Tony Rayns included in the film's press kit,

the director claims they are both "very happy" and "very proud" of *Too Young to Die*. Park Jin-pyo states that "They collaborated with us very fully in making the film, and so a lot of what appears on screen comes directly from their own input. They find that the result is true to their experience and feelings." Not only does the work counter stereotyped views of old people being asexual or non-sexual—Mr Park and Ms Lee are clearly "in love" physically, emotionally and psychologically—but, it goes even further in confronting us with questions on the cinematic representation of sexuality. We are led to think about what constitutes the "erotic" and the "pornographic" in film, anew, with completely fresh eyes.

At the minimalist extreme of contemporary Korean "art" cinema, we find Park Ki-young's second feature, *Camel(s)*. Its centrepiece setting is a love motel, the only setting of his first feature, *Motel Cactus* (1997), which was shot, in colour, by longtime Wong Kar-wai collaborator, Chris Doyle. All the rich colour of the earlier work is completely drained out in the new work, which was filmed on a Sony mini-DV camera in black and white and then transferred onto 35mm film stock, while maintaining a very grainy appearance. A man in his 40s, driving a car in the rain picks up a slightly younger woman from an airport. He apologizes for being late, and yet they don't seem to know one another. It is hard to gauge their appearance because the camera is set up behind the car's front seats. Over the 91 minute running time of *Camel(s)* we view only 50 or fewer shots, and struggle to learn about the two characters and their lives from their very sparse dialogue. Mostly the camera is static but in a restaurant scene it pans back and forth between them across the top of the table viewing food and beer and a wall





Volcano High

in the background. Gradually we come to learn that she is a pharmacist, and from a phone conversation he has in a bathroom, we surmise that he might be an undertaker. Only after they enter a motel, driving through strange plastic flaps (concealing the identity of clandestine guests), do we learn that both of them are married, and are, therefore having an affair. Everything conspires to render *Camel(s)* minimalist, even, the fact that the couple never reach their intended island (paradise) destination, across a bridge which can be seen through a window at their first rest stop. With so little happening, we pay attention to every detail, and when a phone rings in the motel room, it is startling like a gunshot, and at the end, with the camera set up in the back of his car, viewing both figures from behind, a series of jump cuts injects a tense feeling of anticipation that there might be an accident. But the film just ends ...

*The Turning Gate* (*Saeng-lwal-eui Ba-gyon*), the fourth feature made by Hong Sang-soo, is dramatically his most accomplished yet. Hong's first feature, *The Day the Pig Fell in the Well* won the 1996 Dragons and Tigers award in Vancouver and, with *The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998) and *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000), he continues to experiment with narrative form, telling the same story from different perspectives, or overlapping segments of time.<sup>11</sup> *The Turning Gate* has a linear, scripted plot, but the dialogue was improvised or written on a day-by-day basis. Under these circumstances, the quality of the acting is exceptional, and the central male character, Kyung-soo / Kim Sang-kyung, a self-absorbed, successful stage actor who has just failed in his first movie role, rings completely true. Along the way, the film presents a comprehensive portrait of a narcissistic man for whom the audience gradually

loses sympathy, and with two strong and likeable female characters posited against Kyung-soo, Hong Sang-soo corrects the gender imbalance of his first two films where women had been victimized by men.

For me, the most surprising and striking film from anywhere at the 2002 TIFF, and very much a film "on the edge," was *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (*Boksooneun Nauhgut*). Park Chan-wook came to prominence with his third feature film, *J.S.A.: Joint Security Area* (*Gong-dong-kyung-bi-cuyeuk*). This film, perhaps more than any other, was the most significant Korean film to score well at the box office—it surpassed all comers in 2000, including *Mission Impossible 2* and *Gladiator* with over two million admissions—because it successfully combined art film ingredients of skilful direction of an ensemble cast, elegant visual composition and camera work, and serious subject matter with audience appeal. Koreans seem to be extremely interested in their own history, and flocked to see this political thriller about a conflict between soldiers of the North and the South at the DMZ (demilitarized zone). After the achievement of *J.S.A.*, it is perhaps surprising that Park Chan-wook would turn to comic book characterization, stylized genre and action filmmaking, the territory of young upstarts, like Japan's Takashi Miike, with *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. This film is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* on the theme of vengeance. A young deaf steelworker, Ryu, is laid off, just at the time when he is trying to raise money for his dying sister's kidney transplant. With the aid of his wacky girlfriend, he kidnaps his rich employer's child for ransom, after he had been tricked into selling his own kidney. The organ traffickers disappear after taking the money Ryu had with him, and his kidney. Understandably, he seeks



revenge. Meanwhile, the boss's daughter drowns because Ryu can't hear her cries for help and he becomes the target of the rich man's revenge.

"Over-the-top" doesn't begin to describe the outrageous nature of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. Park Chan-wook shifts gears readily from high melodrama to black comedy via horrifying action and with tremendous flair. The soundtrack is as rich as the image track, and its mode changes from subjective to objective, especially in relation to the deaf Ryu. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* is a veritable cult film *tour de force* and is exemplary of contemporary Korean cinema going in a variety of interesting directions.<sup>12</sup>

### Women in Korean cinema and the 7th Pusan International Film Festival

Through watching many Korean films made from the 1960s to the present day, it has become clear to me that traditionally, sexual relations in Korea have been decidedly patriarchal, and, in addition, that domestic violence may be an even more systemic problem there than elsewhere. Recently, some Korean film directors, especially Lee Chang-dong, with *Peppermint Candy*, *Green Fish*, and *Oasis*, have begun to address these problems seriously. Another such director is Kim Ki-duk, whose *Bad Guy* (*Nabbeun Namja* 2001) may well be the single most excessive (and, in my view, repulsive) representation of a male rape fantasy, where the female victim comes to love her oppressor. I had first noticed this phenomenon in Korean cinema when I viewed Kim Sooyong's *The Sea Village* (*Gaetma-eul* 1965) and *Mountain Fire*, aka *Fire in the Valley* (*Sanbul*, 1967) in August 1994 as part of a Montreal film series—a condensed version of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, retrospective. I was simultaneously impressed by the beauty of the films' landscape compositions and repelled by the brutality of the sexual encounters (which, somehow led to love relationships). I was pleased, therefore, to gain a very different impression at the 7th Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) in November 2002 through watching other films made by Kim Soo-yong in a major retrospective which was cleverly programmed by Cho Young-jung to show a gentle, more "feminine" side to the director's work. This was especially evident in the oldest film in the series, *Return of a Man*, (*Dolaon sanai* 1960), a very powerful "male weepie" on sacrificial love, and three films starring the incredibly dynamic and sexy actress, Yun Chung-hi: *Mist* (*An Gae* 1967); *Night Voyage* (*Yahaen*, shot in 1973 and not released until 1977 in a heavily censored version); and *Splendid Outing* (*Hwalyeohan oechul* 1977). In all three films one is reminded of Michelangelo Antonioni's directing of Monica Vitti in their Italian tetralogy (from *L'Avventura* in 1959 to *Il Deserto Rosso* in 1964), except that the characters Yun plays are far more demonstrative. Indeed, director Kim and actress muse Yun seem to be challenging the stereotype of the submissive woman in these films. While state censorship mitigated against endings where the central, female character could be totally free, ambiguity was their solution.

This discussion leads me to a second observation of a tendency which was in evidence at the 7th PIFF: the prominence of Korean women as film directors. By my count, of

the 24 feature length, new Korean films on view at the festival, 6 were directed by women. Outside of a specifically designated "women's" film festival, this is probably the best representation of Korean female film directors ever, in one place. Of the surprise hit of 2002, *The Way Home* (*Jibiro*), it may well be enough to state how wonderful it is that a feature film, directed by a woman, Lee Jeong-hyang, has been so popular with Korean audiences and critics, alike. Women have had to battle for their rights in every country in the world, but, it is surely fair to say that Korean women have had to fight harder against patriarchy than most. *The Way Home* also became the very first Korean film to be picked up for wide distribution in North America by Paramount Classics.<sup>13</sup> Its domestic, commercial success is surprising for another reason: its subject, which hardly promises box office triumph. A seven-year-old boy, Sang-woo, who has been raised in the city, is sent to live in the remote countryside with his mute grandmother by his mother while she looks for work. The leading performances, by non-professional actors, are *The Way Home's* greatest asset, while a realist approach, and the universal, albeit old-fashioned nature of the subject matter provide the opportunity for commercial success outside of Korea. It would be very difficult to argue that *The Way Home* is a feminist work, but another contemporary Korean film directed by a woman certainly fits the bill. Of the few fiction features directed by Korean women before 2002, *Take Care of My Cat* (*Goyangileul Bootakhae* 2001) is surely the finest and most original. Jeong Jae-eun, was one of the first graduates in film from the Korean National University of the Arts, and she made award winning short films before getting to direct her first feature, *Take Care of My Cat*. Like Lee Jeong-hyang, Jeong Jae-eun chooses the realist mode, but with a free-flowing, more contemporary style. Refreshingly, for a film about young people, there is no sex whatsoever in *Take Care of My Cat*, and, very little along the lines of "romance." My recognition of "freshness," here in the film's resistance against showing sexual activity comes primarily through distinct contrast to Hollywood, where films focusing on the lives of young people, these days, seem to be only about "sex," whether they are comedies, romances, or, even horror films.

On the other hand, one can note a very different, openly "fresh" approach to human sexuality in two films directed by Korean women receiving their world premieres at the 7th PIFF: *Ardor* (*Mil Ae*) and *Jealousy Is My Middle Name* (*Jiltunun Naui Him*). *Ardor*, a first fiction work for the director of the remarkable trilogy of documentaries on "comfort women," Byun Young-joo, looks at marriage and a hot, extra-marital affair from the perspective of a wronged woman. The affair is genuinely erotic at times, and, like *Turning Gate*, Byun's film presents a very thorough critique of a manipulative, egocentric man, the lover. *Jealousy Is My Middle Name*, another first fiction feature, for director Park Chan-ok, is far less sexually explicit, but is very interesting for its representation of a "jealous" relationship between a male graduate student and his magazine editor mentor. Like *Ardor*, the film's strength is in its perceptive analysis of competitive, testosterone driven heterosexual men who desire love (or sex). With women also making challengingly polit-



ical documentaries like *On the Right Track Cheolroh* (Wi Eui Saram Deul dir., Lee Ji-young), which documents a dramatic internal union struggle against the old, hierarchical status-quo, and *The Border City* (Gyeonggye Dosi dir., Hong Hyung-sook) which openly supports an outlawed, exiled leader of the Korean unification movement, Song Doo-yul, the stage is set for an even greater involvement of women in the future of Korean cinema, knowing that their work is bound to challenge established norms of the home and workplace, alike.

### Economics and the Korean Screen Quota System

Clearly, 2002 had been a great year for Korean cinema, both financially and artistically, and I join Adam Hartzell in believing it to be the best year ever for the nation's cinema.<sup>14</sup> Remarkably, 2003 was an even better year for the Korean domestic film box office with no fewer than 8 local films in the top 10, and this tendency continued into 2004, where, as of June 10, only *Troy*, an early summer release and *The Passion of the Christ* are "foreign" films which make the list.<sup>15</sup> There is a lesson for all nations who wish to combat Hollywood dominance of their home cinemas, and that is that one needs a theatrical quota. Under the vehemently anti-communist, export-driven "Third Republic" regime, established after a military coup in 1961, and following the repressions of the first Korean Motion Picture Act in 1962, the Screen Quota System was introduced in 1965 along with import restrictions on foreign films. Initially, the quota required that film theatres devote between 60 and 90 days a year to the showing of domestic films and the government limited the number of foreign films imported to no more than one third of Korean films produced each year.<sup>16</sup> Because of the emphasis placed on commercial success and the limits placed on the nature of what could be expressed (and, by extension, creativity) the Korean film industry actually declined through the late 1960s and 1970s. The opening up of society enabled by the changing of government in 1980 to the Fifth Republic led to the revision of the motion picture law, which came into effect in July 1986, and which, among other things allowed for new film companies to be formed. Under the old law only "registered companies with government authority could produce, import and export films."<sup>17</sup> And, whereas import restrictions were lifted, allowing many more Hollywood films to enter Korea, the screen quota was enhanced, with theatre operators forced to show domestic films 40% of the time.

In the 1960s and 70s the number of film theatres—from 344 in 1962 to 662 in 1973—and Korean films produced—from 79 in 1961 to 231 in 1970—increased appreciably, but then declined to 472 theatres and 96 films by 1979.<sup>18</sup> Korean feature film production remained relatively stable in the 1980s at a rate of 80–90 films per year.<sup>19</sup> Although this has since dropped—from a high of 121 in 1991 to a low of 43 in 1998—until the present day, the overall quality of the films and the local interest in them has soared. Undoubtedly, in the face of a more open distribution climate, the percentage of foreign films available for viewing in Korea now far surpasses that of local product, and yet the domestic market share for Korean films continues to climb every year: from 15.9% in 1993 to 49.7% in 2001.<sup>20</sup> Thus, with the aid of the screen quota, the Korean film industry has reached the position, much like Hong Kong's cinema from the 1960s through the early 1990s, where its local audiences prefer their own films over Hollywood's.

*Take Care of My Cat*







Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance

### Korean Cinema, Now

Perhaps, with a renewed emphasis on the box office, the Korean cinema may have experienced an artistic downturn in the new millennium, or, at least since the great year, 2002. Kyung Hyun Kim certainly feels this way, arguing in his book that the "New Korean Cinema" is "finished as a movement" and that, "the Korean film industry since 1999 has scrupulously followed the path of Hollywood and has shown more interest in making deals and formulaic genres than in innovating and devoting itself to the creation of art."<sup>21</sup> Certainly, the demise of the serious film periodical, *Kino* is a blow to the expanding, rich film culture in Korea, and the box office failure of Jang Sun-woo's *The Resurrection of the Little Match Girl* (2002), which was one of the most expensive Korean films ever made, means that directors are being watched more closely by their backers. But the appointment of film director Lee Chang-dong as Korea's Minister of Film Culture bodes very well for the future of film art, and the best contemporary directors continue to work and find ways to make interesting films.

Two recent films exemplify what Korean cinema does best, combining art and commerce: the 2003 box office champion, *Memories of Murder* (*Sarineui Chu-eok*), directed by Bong Joon-ho, and the aforementioned Cannes winner, *Old Boy*. Bong Joon-ho's first feature was the popular comedy, *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (*Puhan dahsuh cui Geh* 2000), which counterpointed dog lovers with dog haters and even one man who eats dogs all inhabiting the same apartment complex. With *Memories of Murder*, the director continues his comic approach to serious social issues, but in a much more dangerous vein. The film's mystery/detective story, set in the 1980s, is based on Korea's first case of a "serial killer".

Interestingly, the focus of the film gradually shifts from the search for the identity of the rapist/killer to the police procedures involved, and ends by indicting the brutality of the police, while leaving the mystery of the murderer's identity intact. The criminal acts are never shown, whereas the beatings of suspects are graphically depicted. I can imagine that, in a Hollywood version of this story, the

killer's identity would be revealed at least by the end of the film, and, moreover, his character would be the central one. One could also imagine a Hollywood comedy of bungling police action, but not one involving serial rape and murder. In embracing *Memories of Murder*, Korean audiences are clearly much more open both to plot ambiguity and pessimism (again recalling North American audiences of the late 60s and early 70s).

After the box office failure of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, Park Chan-wook changed his strategy, for his next film, *Old Boy*, by hiring the services of two Korean male stars, Choi Min-shik and Yu Ji-tae, to play the hero and villain, respectively. Initially even more bizarre than *Sympathy* in its temporal and modal shifts from gritty realism to surrealism, *Old Boy* brilliantly evokes the nightmarish imprisonment of Choi's businessman character in its first 30 minutes. Ultimately not as satisfying or original as its predecessor, *Old Boy* is very much an avant-garde work, and an even more surprising box office success than *Memories of Murder*. If one can imagine Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (US, 2004) without the romance, and with large doses of violence, one can begin to understand Park Chan-wook's achievement in reaching ordinary Korean viewers.

With serious works of cinematic realism like *Memories of Murder* and genre experiments like *Old Boy* appealing to local audiences and critics, alike, Korean cinema is at an all-time high point in its history. And, remarkably, at the time of this writing, it is just possible that the eagerly awaited, highly deserved "breakthrough" for Korean cinema is actually happening. In June 2004, three Korean films (including *Memories of Murder*) were released in France within a 10 day period. Kim Ki-duk's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and, Spring* is currently in its second month of commercial release in Toronto and is about to become the first Korean film to receive an art-house release in Montreal, with French sub-titles. *Oasis* is also due to receive a limited release in Montreal. There are no fewer than thirteen Korean films showing at Montreal's Fantasia film festival



and almost all of the screenings are selling out. And, [www.screendaily.com](http://www.screendaily.com) is reporting that 5 Korean films are currently on the worldwide, top 30, film box office chart!

I'd like to thank my editor, Susan Morrison for her patience and rapid, hard work on making this essay much more presentable than it was, initially. I also thank Donato Totaro, the editor of [www.offscreen.com](http://www.offscreen.com) for allowing some previously published material to appear here, and Mijeong Lee, our resident Korean film expert, for enabling me to see so many Korean films in Montreal.

**Peter Harry Rist** teaches film studies at Concordia University, in Montreal. Over the last seven years he has become more and more interested in Asian cinema, and has recently been researching links between landscape painting and early East Asian films.

#### NOTES

- 1 Throughout this article, I will refer to South Korea, or, the official designation, the "Republic of Korea," simply as "Korea." This decision is not politically motivated, in fact, I believe that it is really important to recognize that there are two Koreas and that the North has at times been a very active film producing nation—see Hyangjin Lee's *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity • Culture • Politics* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000) which includes a great deal of discussion on North Korean film production. But, these days, with the tragic, desperate isolation of the communist North contributing to a complete absence of its films outside its borders, it is perhaps justified to employ the simplified term, "Korea," in the context of contemporary film.
- 2 The exception might be mainland China, with both "official" and unofficial films, including Tian Zhuang-zhuang's *Springtime in a Small Town*, the "New Year" comedy, and box office hit, *Big Shot's Funeral*, avant-garde theatre director, Meng Jinghui's first film *Chicken Poets*, Ning Ying's powerful documentary, *Railroad of Hope*, and, on the "unofficial" side, Jia Zhangke's great *Unknown Pleasures* and Liu Bingjian's *Cry Woman*, both of which were co-produced in Korea.
- 3 See Peter Rist, "Korean Cinema in Montreal," on website *Offscreen*, <[http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/9709/offscreen\\_essay/Koreancinema.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/9709/offscreen_essay/Koreancinema.html)> posted September 18, 1997, and, "An Introduction to Korean Cinema," on website, *Offscreen* <[http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/9810/offscreen\\_essays/Korean.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/9810/offscreen_essays/Korean.html)>, posted October 16, 1998, which is the original version of "Corée: Le cinéma des grandes promesses," translated from English to French by Élie Castiel, *Séquences*, no. 198 (Sept./Oct., 1998), pp. 32–37.
- 4 Adriano Aprà, editor, *Le cinéma coréen* (Paris, Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1993).
- 5 See, Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004), and Anthony C.Y. Leong, *Korean Cinema: The New Hong Kong* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford Publishing, 2002). Note: The author insists on referring to himself in the western fashion with his given names preceding his family name. Thus, I also refer to him as Kyung Hyun Kim.
- 6 Of the 19 films directed by Im Kwon-taek, made since 1981 that I've seen, at least 12 were shot by Jung Il-sun including the very best, *Mandara* (Mandala, 1981), *Pul-ui ttal* (Daughter of the Flames, 1983), *Gilsottum* (1986), *Adada* (1987), and *Sopyonje* (1993). It is high time that some consideration be given to Jung's contribution to the artistry of those films he worked on.
- 7 David E. James and Kyung Hyun Kim, eds., *Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002). This book is a collection of essays which originated in a conference on the director held at the University of Southern California in 1996. It is also the very first book on Korean cinema published exclusively in the U.S.
- 8 This is very different from the strategy used by the Farrelly Bros., who in *Shallow Hal* (2001) cast Jack Black's character's imagined love interest as the glamorous Gwyneth Paltrow, whereas her real, "fat" self was played by another actress.
- 9 I have taken these figures from the amazingly comprehensive website: "Darcy's Korean Film Page" <[www.koreanfilm.org](http://www.koreanfilm.org)>. Another Korean film, *Marrying the Mafia* overtook *The Way Home* with 5 million admissions, and *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* and *Harry Potter: The*

*Chamber of Secrets*, which were released in December, also eventually outgrossed it.

- 10 Both the Toronto and Vancouver festival catalogues incorrectly list the year of release as 2002, when, in fact, *Volcano High* opened in Korea on December 8, 2001 and ran for 5 weeks. Strictly speaking, it didn't place as high on the 2001 box office chart as Darcy Paquet claimed—according to *Screen International*, No. 1348 (March 15–21, 2002) it was 15th—; Paquet notes that his admission figure includes the first two weeks of 2002. In his *Dragons and Tigers* programme notes for Vancouver, Tony Rayns cleverly states that "*Volcano High* also has a trump card up its sleeve; its the perfect antidote to *Harry Potter*." p. 83.
- 11 The English language titles of Hong Sang-soo's films sometimes stray far from the original meaning. For example, *Oh! Soo-jung*, an exclamation followed by the central female character's name ended up as *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, which is a far too lurid expression of what actually happens in the film. We see a man's version of his seduction of her, and then her own version of the story. For *Turning Gate*, according to Derek Elley, in *Variety* (June 24, 2002), the Korean title translates literally as "Life's Discoveries," whereas the original English title was "On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate," which cleverly gives a very novelistic sense to the piece. I assume that in each case, Hong chose the English-language titles—he studied film in the U.S., so, presumably his command of English is very good—but the differences from the Korean titles are very striking.
- 12 A more extensive discussion of the Korean films at the 2002 TIFF, effectively a longer version of the first half of this article, entitled "Korean Cinema 2002" can be found at <[http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new\\_offscreen/koreancinema\\_2002.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/koreancinema_2002.html)>, posted March 31, 2003.
- 13 *Swiri*, (or *Shiri*), *Tell Me Something* (Chang Yoon-hyun, 1999), *Nowhere to Hide* (Lee Myung-se, 1999), *The Isle* (Kim Ki-duk, 2000), *Lies* (Jang Sun-woo, 2000) and a few other titles have received limited distribution in North America, but, Paramount Classics' release of *The Way Home* is the first mainstream release of a Korean film, and an art-house, New York-based distributor, Kino, has lost money on all three Korean films it has released—*Nowhere to Hide*, *Take Care of My Cat* and *Chiwason*—and is unlikely to take a chance on any more.
- 14 Perhaps in recognition of the importance of 2002, Darcy Paquet devoted a few pages of his annual report to "top ten lists." See <<http://koreanfilm.org/topten2002.html>> where Hartzell writes "I argue that 2002 was the best damn year yet for Korean film. . . ." The other contributors were Paquet, Tom Giammarco and Kyu Hyun Kim.
- 15 Again, I am indebted to "Darcy's Korean Film Pages" for the statistical data, and, more. See, <<http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm03.html>> and <<http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm04.html>>.
- 16 In, Hyangjin Lee, op. cit., p. 49. See also "Industrialization in Film Making," in *The History of Korean Cinema*, Lee Young-il and Choe Young-chol, translated by Richard Lynn Grever (Seoul: Jimoondang Publishing Co., 1998 [Motion Picture Promotion Corporation, 1988]), pp. 143–48.
- 17 "New Chapter of Korean Film History – Freedom of Film Production," Lee Young-il, p. 209.
- 18 All statistics are taken from Lee Young-il, p. 148, p. 187.
- 19 See the annual publications of the Motion Picture Promotion Corporation, Republic of Korea, for example, *Korea Cinema 93*, which shows a low of 73 Korean films (made or released, it is not clear) in 1986 and a high of 110 in 1989, p. 36.
- 20 These statistics are taken from *Korean Cinema 2002*, Lee Keun-sang, editor (Seoul: Korean Film Commission, KOFIC, 2002), p. 218.
- 21 Kyung Hyun Kim (2004), op. cit., p. x.

**\*A note on names and titles:** Family names (e.g., Im) normally precede given names (e.g., Kwon-taek) in Korean. I follow the most contemporary transliterated spelling and don't capitalize the second part of the given name. In the past, a number of different transliteration systems have proliferated, but, perhaps looking ahead to the World Cup of Football (Soccer) in 2002, the Korean government adopted a standardised new romanisation system in 2000. This eliminates apostrophes ("taek" used to be written "t'aek") and standardises consonants (all "b"s and "p"s are now written as "b"). Nevertheless, whereas the film festival towns of Pusan and Puchon have become "Busan" and "Bucheon," the international film festivals in these towns have retained the original transliteration for the sake of retaining their acronyms: "PIFF" for Pusan International Film Festival and "PiFan" for the Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival.



# Striking Home

TRENDS AND CHANGES  
IN VIETNAMESE CINEMA

BY KIM WORTHY

Not bad for a cadre-dominated movie industry in which the People's Army runs the major studio and one of last year's acclaimed films is titled, *Hai Binh Builds a Hydropower Plant*.<sup>1</sup>

—*TIME/Asia* (Hanoi), commenting on *Bar Girls* (*Gay Nhai*), a 2003 state-produced Vietnamese film which generated \$1 million in revenue.

*TIME/Asia's* quip, while true, is unfair. In recent years, Giaiphong Films (the People's studio) has also made movies that have received international praise, including *Guava Season* (*Mua Oi*, Dang Nhat Minh, 2001) and *The Glorious Time in Me Thao* (*Me Thao—Thoi Vang Bong*, Viet Linh, 2002). A rave review in *Variety*





of the state-produced *King of the Rubbish Dump* (*Vua Bại Rách*, aka *Foul King*, which premiered out of competition at Palm Springs in 2003), compared the skills and humanity of longtime Vietnamese writer-director Do Minh Tuan to Kenji Mizoguchi.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the second film produced by a private studio (the first was *Bar Girls 2*), *Long-Legged Girls* (*Nhung Co Gai Chan Dai*, 2004), about the fashion industry in Viet Nam, is also a blockbuster. All this, and the latter's very young director, Vu Ngoc Dang was in 1996 the first graduate of the film-director degree at Ho Chi Minh City College for Theatre and Cinema.

While the young urban Vietnamese consider those productions which urge remembrance of past deprivations by older directors from the past two decades banal, trite, and boring, these films nevertheless interest foreigners and rural Vietnamese.<sup>3</sup> The newer films' recent commercialism may be seen as a pragmatic response to a new social system based on economic change, and may also be read as a discourse rebelling against political suffocation. But the earlier films say much about Viet Nam that speaks for the young too. They not only commemorate the suffering of war, but may be read as signifying the trauma of political and artistic self-censorship, and the yearning for expression of a suffocated national consciousness.

Senses of aesthetic value vary across the cinemas of whole cultures as well as from film to film. But cross-currents in Vietnamese film seem to reflect social and political disturbances within this particular society in this particular period, rather than the work of individual *auteurs*. Rey Chow, Chris Berry, and Susan Jeffords argue that scenes that are over-the-top may express an art of national trauma in various films, genres, and cinemas.<sup>4</sup> They cite the Tiananmen Square massacres in China and the dividedness that in the US resulted from the traumatic Vietnam war, as sources of compensatory hysteria in the cinemas of those nations. An equally fragmenting national shock is perceptible in Vietnamese films by both the older and the younger generation of directors. In Vietnam the hysterical cross-current may be attributable not simply to violence, as in the case of China and the US, but to the combination of unbelievable loss and the betrayal of ideals. Do Minh Tuan agrees that bizarre moments in Vietnamese film reflect severe and unbalancing disturbances: "We address the psychological suffering through our abnormalities."<sup>5</sup> Added to all of this, the "abnormalities" might signify the precarious and contradictory psychological position of Vietnamese directors themselves, as government officials who must enforce censorship of their own movies.

The most significant recent trauma for Viet Nam was three decades of war and its aftermath. The American war came not long after the defeat of the French and independence in 1945. It took two million lives, and another million as a result of injuries and aftereffects from unexploded bombs, landmines, and Agent Orange. After that war, border skirmishes with China and the invasion of Cambodia

cost more lives and money. Since then radical tensions between populace and state created half a million Vietnamese refugees. Terrible poverty came as a result of war and the twenty-year trade embargo; in 1990 the poverty rate was greater than 60%.<sup>6</sup>

Even though Vietnamese directors were among the elite in an impoverished time, in the 1980s and 90s they were in the uncomfortable position of artists and writers in any totalitarian state who want to entertain and create something beautiful but have to watch their step. Moreover, from the early days on, the directors *were* the Party. Approval of the start of production came from the Deputy General Director of the Viet Nam Cinema Department of the Culture Ministry. For decades, this position was filled by the illustrious filmmaker, Nguyen Thu. As director Dang Nhat Minh observed in 1988, "Who is the government? It's Mr. Thu!"<sup>7</sup> The censor being situated within the filmmakers themselves likely adds to the manifestation of "abnormal" moments. Across many films, a multiplicity of visual, musical, and dialogic excesses creates recognition of the massively-suffering Vietnamese consciousness through a certain deviance, outlined below.

While many younger directors also want to ignore the past, they have new traumas to contend with in the face of the enormous economic changes. The Socialist Republic of Viet Nam has had a market-driven economy since 1995 after Clinton's 1994 lifting of the US trade embargo against its former enemy. The poverty rate fell from 60% in 1990 to an incredible 11 % by 2003. Although this naturally eased hardship at every level, even in the most rural and mountainous areas of the country, it also rapidly brought inequality and other serious social problems, especially greed and corruption. Today intellectuals in Viet Nam say the country combines the worst of both socialism and capitalism. Party cadres are regarded as elite, dictatorial opportunists. Revolutionaries who made incredible sacrifices to get rid of foreigners now see the "return of the living dead": Hiltons, KFCs, CNN on cable. Corruption is an open secret, morality said to be completely replaced by no-holds-barred, IMF-style capitalism. The Party seeks foreign investment for all economic problems, encouraging profit from Viet Nam's cheap labor.<sup>8</sup>

Another cultural shock of the new economy is the army of tourists invading the countryside. The tourism industry ignores the country's painful past, transforming it back into a French colony or a nostalgia package for US war veterans. Threats to Vietnamese control of its self-image have thus come with the drive for corporate investment, as the country now "belongs" to others besides the people themselves. New hotels and golf resorts are like gold for officials whose institutions occupy the land.<sup>9</sup> It is feared that after all the victories over foreign domination, the new films will similarly offer up Viet Nam in the service of foreign values.<sup>10</sup> Asked whether the making of films like his would strengthen or weaken Vietnamese identity, *Bar Girls* writer-director





Le Hoang replied smiling, "Strengthen it. Because it couldn't get any weaker."<sup>11</sup>

This pre-capitalist socialist society has apparently come to embrace the exploitative strain of commercial cinema as part of the government's shift towards globalization. Understandably, filmmakers like Le Hoang who were formerly obligated to the government for every *dong* of support are excited over the prospect of greater freedom. Resistance and criticism in the earlier films, whether overt or covert, was always compromised by the obligation to the party for funds. The over-the-top moments of many films may have been an unconscious expression of this disordered state of affairs as well as of the suffering of the Vietnamese people, through content and images of uncontrollable emotion.

### Background

Other than French productions after World War I, production by Vietnamese in Vietnamese language began only in 1938 with Dam Quang Thien's *The Flower from the Cemetery*.<sup>12</sup> Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam Feature Film Studio produced its first narrative, *The Same River*, in 1959. Since then the industry has produced only three hundred features, with technicians and artists educated or trained abroad, mostly in Soviet Bloc countries. It was strictly a communist enterprise in a country run by the thirteen-man Politburo, nominally accountable to the Central Committee of the Lao Dong (Workers Party). The top management was always comprised of filmmakers, but the atmosphere for making films was never free of overbearing

ideological influence.<sup>13</sup> Vietnamese reviews were heavily pro-communist.

Vietnamese films began moving toward greater freedom of expression in the early 1980s. While criticism of the Socialist Republic was very rarely overt, films did use the power to protest in varying degrees. The first modern Vietnamese film, *How To Behave: A Story About Kindness* (Tran Van Thuy, 1985), is about the first anniversary of the death of a film director whom the film crew had visited on his deathbed. In this remarkable rambling, pre-*doi moi* documentary, the self-mocking narrator makes no attempt to camouflage political discourse.<sup>14</sup> "The People's Theatre," the voiceover sneers, "The People's Council, The People's Police...devoted to the people. What's that mean?" At one point an angry bricklayer yells at the film crew, "Hey, why don't you guys get a real job?" Later the narrator says, "But who'd give up comfort and power to live an ordinary life? There's the contradiction. Our commentary rambles on and will test the censor's patience..."

Not only the direct reference to the censor here, but the self-criticism, is testimony to the dynamics involved when humane investigation meets economic and political difficulty. Implicit under its careless gaiety is uneasiness about the filmmakers' own position. At the same time that they are Party bureaucrats, they are artists, for whom by definition free expression is essential.

Even since *doi moi*, the implicit criticism of the Vietnamese government by artists, writers, and filmmakers voicing the malaise of impoverished people who willingly bore great burdens under terrible conditions but had been



sold out, was met with varying degrees of tolerance. But Mark Philip Bradley argues that even the most revisionist films (those of the 1980s) present a critique of contemporary society, albeit largely conservative. Their remembrances of revolutionary egalitarianism struck home against the corrupt and repressive elements of postwar society and its newly capitalist materialism.<sup>15</sup>

### Vietnamese Films of the Late 80s and 90s

For comparison to Vietnamese cinema today, I will focus on five feature films released in Viet Nam after *doi moi* as a body of discourse that offers cinematic resistance to the power elite: *The Retired General* (Tuong Ve Hung, Dang Nhat Minh, 1988),

*Luck Trier* (Vietnamese title unavailable; Tu Huy, 1989), *Black Cactuses* (Vietnamese title unavailable; Le Dan, 1991), *The Strolling Singers* (Doi Hat Rong, Chau Rue, 1991), and *Nostalgia for the Countryside* (Thuong Nho Dong Que, Dang Nhat Minh, 1995).<sup>16</sup> I will also point out the instances of "abnormality" that give them uniqueness beyond their humanitarianism and political critique

Serious risks were taken in the well-known *The Retired General* (1988), adapted from a popular 1986 story by Nguyen Huy Thiep. The tone is set when General Thuan's unit brings him home to his son's house, where vicious German shepherds lunge at him. Small but disturbing signs convey corruption and uneasiness—the music at the celebratory feast is loud, the accolades false, and a relative given cigarettes to distribute to the poor at the gate keeps them, substituting a cheaper brand. The general's insane wife pantomimes gun battles and the family arrogantly exploits two homeless villagers as servants.

The son's wife Thuy breeds the dogs to sell and treats them better than the humans in her care. The general observes her concern only with money and status, as well as her adultery. He doesn't know she is taking money for his letters, written from kindness, recommending village sons to Army officials. An idealist, the general tries to help the suffering servants, sending them back to their village with money, only to learn later that the man is dead and his niece, Lai, has become a prostitute. The general's wife dies, the funeral is an opportunistic mockery, and the general suffers mightily. Eventually he discovers a neighbor quarreling loudly with Thuy over money paid for one of the general's letters which did not have the desired result. The general, who has high blood pressure, hears about this scam in shock and disbelief, climbs the stairs rubbing his temples, and dies.

Both story and film were remarkable when released for challenging the official image of Viet Nam as a nation unified by the ideals and sacrifice the general represents. In the last two scenes, unprecedented stylistic effects occur: the

frame turns upside-down when the general hears of Lai's fate; the general narrates in voiceover for the first time; the camera holds objects in ECU for the first time; and we see the film's only ELS of the landscape. Because of their psychological overtones, one would expect these elements to push the origins of the hero's collapse further toward merely personal tragedy. Instead they help restore to earlier scenes the sense that the new society, born of rapid urbanization and economic crisis, is at the root of the family's behavior. They attach themselves to the meaning supplied by Lai's "fall"—that money has replaced kindness as the guiding light.

In *The Retired General* the scene that most graphically criticizes corrupt and repressive elements of postwar society and its newly capitalist materialism is the feeding of the Alsatian puppies which Thuy favors over people. The director chooses to display the aborted fetuses minced and lovingly fed to the dogs on-screen rather than referring to this practice in dialogue. The repugnant deed is first served up bluntly to the audience, then filtered through a stylistic concentration on fam-

ily interaction and human emotion. Nguyen Khac Loi's careful lighting and camerawork center our interest entirely on the old actor's performance—on the human face of obsolete ideals rather than on an obscene cynicism.

*The Retired General* was the first of many stories about veterans who willingly bore the great burdens under terrible conditions, returning to deep depression upon finding corruption and self-seeking among the impoverished city people and consequently feeling that they had been betrayed. Unfortunately, it was the young, postwar generation and especially women who were the main target for blame. Gendered evil extends in other Vietnamese movies to distrust of the market economy; for example, see *Black Cactuses* below.

Many post-*doi moi* Vietnamese movies commented more subtly on the people's idealistic victory having resulted in a totalitarian state, for example through exposing the resulting moral and emotional confusion. An iconic, low-angle shot of a strong young woman in the distinctive conical hat, deftly poling her boat under a bridge in *The Girl on the River* (Co Bai Tren Song; Dang Nhat Minh, 1987) works equally well as family photograph and as nationalist metaphor; but the woman, like Viet Nam since 1975, has a "painful past": she has been corrupted.

A highly watchable returned-veteran film criticizing the economy is *Luck Trier* (1989). This funny but finally deadly serious story is well hammered-together and, while the film too frequently suffers from lugubrious timing and to a certain extent also inadvertently promotes the very thing it explicitly condemns (the dream of easy riches), the photography,



ABOVE: Dang Nhat Minh's *Nostalgia for the Countryside*



sound, and acting are good. Its antihero symbolizes the urban poor who are manipulated through the need for hope.

A high-ranking Army officer, Khien, so poor he receives bicycle parts in lieu of wages, is addicted to playing the lottery, and rationalizes his foolishness as an investment to support his wife and four children. Also, the dyke protecting the land where his ancestors are buried is crumbling into the river as flood season approaches. Khien's family is starving, his wife leaves him, he loses his job but manages to acquire a bicycle pump and find a spot on a busy street to set up business. He can't even make a meager living in Ha Noi due to the corrupt interference with the vendors by the police. When he sells his pump to buy a lottery number, Khien's pitch that the pump is the best kind in the world because it was "made in Viet Nam" turns out to be the worst thing he could say—no one will even trade for it. This is a tragicomic commentary on the failures of national production at a liberating distance from an official "line."

The first few frames turn out to be the film's penultimate scene, making the entire movie one long flashback. Khien faints as a winning number is called that we think is his, but the same sequence is played backwards at the end of the film and we learn he arrived too late at the ticket-seller's with money for the winning ticket. This novel structure underscores the more familiar frame of the flashback to construct of Khien a social type, interchangeable with anyone in the crowd (or with the film viewer), who could just as easily become caught in the circle of dream, pursuit, and loss.

At one point Khien looks straight at the camera, announcing to the audience, "I'd be respected if I hit the jackpot." On one level this remark bemoans the disintegration of regard for age and hard work, but like *How to Behave* (1985), *The Retired General*, *The Strolling Singers* (1991), and *Nostalgia for the Countryside* (1995), it also points to the government's betrayal of those who served. On yet another level, *Luck Trier* induces excitement for the lottery even as it warns us off. In a manner that prefigures *Bar Girls* (2003), at times *Luck Trier*, like its hero, urges spectators in the opposite direction from the film's intended moralizing message, that gambling is destructive. Complaints about the terrible state of the economy in *Luck Trier* inadvertently create enthusiasm for the prospect of quick riches. *Bar Girls* arouses the Vietnamese public's appetite for nightclubs even as it delivers its sermon on drugs and AIDs.

Also making the case for trying one's own luck is the film's narrative structure. Khien dreams the lucky number and he only just misses buying it. The film implies that he was right to insist he could hit it big and it endorses Khien's hopes directly in his most rational speech on the subject, which goes virtually unrefuted in/by the film: "Hundreds become rich each day [through the lottery]. Without hope how can people live in hardship?" The combination in *Luck Trier* of both criticism against the government responsible for Viet Nam's terrible economy, and indulgence in the capitalist fantasy indicates the essentially bipolar character of Vietnamese filmmakers' position.

In *The Strolling Singers* (*Doi Hat Rong*, Chau Rue, 1991) returned veterans' sacrifices earn them only joblessness after the war, poverty and urban decadence dissolve tradi-

tional social bonds, and the poor find refuge in poetry and music. The central veteran character, Hung, leaves the People's Hospital after two years with his injured eyes almost cured, and not realizing that his pretty wife Tran is off sleeping with Lan, a local hoodlum. Hung's devoted war buddy Long keeps the facts well hidden because the shock of Tran's betrayal could blind Hung. Long, having himself lost a leg in the war, repairs shoes for a living on the steps of a public fountain, where Hung hangs out with him, saddened by his wife's indifference. Another woman, Mai, hears Hung sing about "the road, the wind, the mountain, where the forest waits for the birds, blue clouds continue on their weary way, and the distant star wanders endlessly." One night when Tran turns up her nose at a meal he has made, Hung in anger smashes everything, including his guitar. She leaves him for good, and he goes completely blind. Mai visits Hung to learn his beautiful song, but Hung still loves Tran, whom Lan has forced to work as a bar girl. Tran has a change of heart towards Hung, but is wise enough to let him go. Hung resigns himself to living without Tran, with Mai in a new house provided by the Disabled Veterans Bureau.

The gentle Vietnamese songs Hung sings convey nostalgia for their honest values, a trait typical of films by the older generation. Despite this conservative tone, and the film's plug for the government in the end, *Singers* took a chance presenting an image of disillusionment in jarring contrast to government propaganda.

The beautifully-filmed *Black Cactuses* (1991) registers as a pointed reminder of the failures of Vietnamese communism. Lai is a half-Vietnamese, half-African American young hero, one of the many thousands of *bui doi* or "dust of life," as other Vietnamese call the Asian-Americans forbidden schooling or jobs because their fathers were GLs.

Lai is angry and well on his way to self-destruction when he rescues from would-be rapists Ma, a young woman belonging to a minority ethnic group, the Cham. They fall in love but each young person's family is prejudiced against the other. Ma becomes pregnant and is thrown out to live with Lai. They build a little shed by the railroad tracks and Lai struggles hard as a farmer, but after a drought dries up his corn he leaves for Ho Chi Minh City to find work. Ma is injured in an accident at the former US army base where, along with other desperately poor people, she gathered scraps to survive and feed the baby. After a bad experience in the city as a gigolo, Lai reunites with his wife and child.

Director Le manages to make honorable the lives of what Americans would call "the homeless".<sup>17</sup> He records the coexistence of struggle and serenity in 1990s Viet Nam, enhancing the interconnection of individual, community, and place with images of a canal and silhouetted oxen; a rural tea hut where crickets sing; the moon and clouds over a temple of a Cham community; yaks and goats grazing under trees as trains cross against the mountains. But Le Dan's camera never abandons his central image, the cactus. Like the prostitute in *The Girl on the River*, it draws to itself a number of universal meanings and also carries a political critique. In the prologue, Lai, the strong, silent hate object of the more prejudiced locals because he is *bui doi*, smashes a cactus with his bare foot, grinding it to show how tough





Le Dan's *Black Cactuses*.

he is. The cactus here introduces another politically-sensitive theme: the self-hatred resulting from the double betrayal of children by US soldiers and of Vietnamese by the Vietnamese government. The cactus appears in flower during Lai's courtship of Ma; its fruit is picked and eaten by Ma and her friends just before we learn Ma is pregnant; and when a wicked seducer in Ho Chi Minh City who wants to exploit the 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Act to get into the US as Lai's "accompanying relative" holds Lai virtually prisoner, a cactus is also captive in a pot in Lai's "cell." Symbolizing a generation's pain and strength in its hardiness, this flourishing desert plant is an icon, but scarcely the kind of image to please the aging officials responsible.

*Nostalgia for the Countryside* (1995), like *The Retired General*, is based on a story by Nguyen Huy Thiep. Many-layered like the story from which it is adapted, the film centers around seventeen-year old Nham, who lives near a rural village in Northern Viet Nam. His real interest is poetry but he quit school to support his mother, his sister-in-law Ngu, and younger sister Minh, making bricks and planting and harvesting the family fields. His beautiful cousin, Quyen, comes for a visit, arousing Nham's fantasies. There is also a subplot about village adultery, and a tragic highway accident in which young Minh is killed.

The film satirizes the Party's mindless use of rhetoric through a jargon-spouting schoolteacher. Pontificating (however justifiably) on "the peasant's suffering," he steps in excrement—a funny moment showing the film's opinion of this communist bore. A marvelous water puppets play-within-a-play of the laboring farmers planting rice is perfectly situated to precede this lecture with contrasting unpretentious affection for the peasant.

A serious scene from *Nostalgia for the Countryside* sent

New York viewers at the Museum of Modern Art into roars of laughter. When Ngu, abandoned by her husband and very lonely, embraces Nham, he ejaculates. Opening his eyes afterwards he actually reaches inside his pants, then looks at wet fingers. To westerners, it seemed extremely inappropriate. The graphic quality of this moment broke the spell of romance for western viewers; but before the chortling ceased, the film threw the audience into further fits with Nham's words, in voiceover and English subtitles above exaggeratedly emotional chords: "From that moment, I became a man." This was followed by an insert, apparently unconnected, of a dog licking ice cream that had fallen on the ground, which must have struck western viewers as showing a staggering lack of discernment given the context.

However, the "excess" described here is not in the original story as written. The closest allusion there to Nham's cinematic ejaculation is these lines in Nham's poem about the connection of the fields to human life and death:

*At that moment, Oh, Friend, Oh my young friend  
Please understand me  
I tried to make the fields so fertile*<sup>18</sup>

The speaker is a wounded soldier and blood is spilled, not semen. In adapting the film from the story, director Minh deliberately and disconcertingly made literal the originally figurative fertility image.

Through such choices, Minh and other Vietnamese filmmakers may have been attempting to break out of the conditions existing at the time. These moments suggest after so many attacks and complicities an identity at least partially defined through the iteration of images and ideas that are normally repressed.



### The Situation Today

This is an interesting time for Vietnamese film. On January 1, 2003, the Ministry of Culture and Information decreed the production and distribution of film a commodity regulated by business law. Foreign films appear in the country's remaining cinemas—everything from action films to *Finding Nemo*. Vietnamese films compete with all this on a pitiful advertising budget.

At this point, I will look at some recent films, by a more traditional director, Viet Linh (*The Glorious Time in Me Thao Hamlet*, 2002), and by filmmakers who have embraced the Hollywood style: Le Hoang (*Bar Girls*, 2003, and *Bar Girls 2*, 2004) and Vu Ngoc Dang (*Long-Legged Girls*, 2004). As noted earlier, *Bar Girls 2* was the first non-state film made and financed by Vietnamese by a private studio, Galaxy. *Long-Legged Girls* was the second.

The huge hit status of the state-produced *Bar Girls* (2003) marked a new direction in expressive freedom. One of the lead characters is addicted to drugs and dies from a willful overdose, the other gets HIV/AIDs, falls in love with a nice man, discovers he is married, is chastened, and reforms. Many scenes belie the assumption that the film's popularity came only from pandering to the temporary tastes of young Vietnamese audiences. Called to a party on a boat which turns out to be a set-up for rape, another young woman dives into the river and swims to shore. Original music kicks in as she hits the water. Her strength and resilience, depicted by her indifference as she sits afterwards drying her hair and chatting with her mother, might be regarded as peculiarly Vietnamese.

No such distinctive moments occur in *Bar Girls 2*

(*Cinderella of the Streets*, 2004), a more ordinary effort—unsurprisingly, as the sequel was intended to capitalize on the original's success.<sup>19</sup> The male lead is real-life megastar Vietnamese pop singer, Quang Dung, who takes up with My, the Cinderella bar girl of the title. Locations are fancy restaurants, resort swimming pools, and a hotel, where thugs torture My to persuade her to return to the trade. A concert audience waits for Quang Dung who does not want to leave My's hospital room. When he finally performs to save the desperate manager and appease the people, My miraculously appears onstage to dance, only to collapse at the end. Quang carries her, limp but still breathing, out through the crowd.

Concerts bookend both *Bar Girls 2* and an earlier film, *The Glorious Time in Me Thao Hamlet* (2002): while Quang Dung performs pop music at the start and close of the first film, the beautiful *ca tru* music of Hanoi is performed in the second. *Me Thao*, set at the start of the twentieth century, is the story of a musician escaping from a murder charge and forced to part from his lover, a great singer, to come to Me Thao hamlet. He finds that the rich hamlet chief, whose beloved has been killed in a car accident, has ordered every modern object—mirrors, clocks, dolls, bicycles—burned, not as an offering to the dead, but because the automobile caused his grief. A mute servant girl, desperately in love with the crazed lord, pretends to be the dead woman at night as he prays to her at her altar. The servant girl tries every way she can to make him forget, chewing a ceramic shard to bloody her lips and entice him, and dragging a statue he carved of his lover to the lake to drown. In return the chief orders that she be drowned.

Viet Linh's *The Glorious Time in Me Thao Hamlet*.





The musician, who is the emotional and narrative center of the story, rescues her. The lord goes against tradition by holding a "God's light" ceremony, his servants lofting the paper lanterns high into the night sky. As a result of his hubris, he becomes deathly ill. The musician knows the only way to cure the nobleman is to play for him on a cursed *dan day*, a lute-like instrument, with his former lover accompanying him with her voice. The musician plays and dies, the master is restored to health and sanity and frees his servant. The people happily bring out hidden record-players and other modern objects.

The politics of Viet Nam and Vietnamese filmmaking is discernible through both the state production, *Me Thao*, and the private, *Bar Girls 2*. Each traces the connections of appearance and reality. The mute in *Me Thao* and My in *Bar Girls 2* both seem lowly but their essential purity is ultimately recognized, just as the Party wants to be recognized as socialist beneath its capitalist veneer, and as Vietnamese directors would like to be the free artists they are not. My's limp form in the arms of her adoring lover in the last moment in *Bar Girls 2* resembles a remarkable image in *Me Thao* in which the bereaved nobleman is having sex with the life-sized wooden statue he has carved of his elegant dead beloved. These extravagant and melodramatic moments in each film inflect the hope of bringing the desired object back to life through sheer romantic will.

In addition, in *Bar Girls 2*, the viewer is very often at a loss as to whether what they are watching is happening in the story world or is a film being made. In a subplot, scenes are frequently ended abruptly by a director calling, "Cut!" and we realize what we just saw was part of the movie being made within the movie. Underlying the endorsement of the modern twentieth-century commodities in *Me Thao*, the upscale locations *Bar Girls 2* and the film's *nouveau vague* self-reflexive film-within-a-film, is both stories' strong identification with the artistic vision. They move toward an ideology identifying consumption of art and music as progressive and social-minded. In the end, however, both stories esteem artists who sacrifice self for community. Both the new-style Vietnamese director, Le Hoang, and the old-style, Viet Linh, working in the Vietnamese film industry today thus manage to affirm artistic autonomy and socialist values, simultaneously.

Likewise, another new film, *Long-Legged Girls*, dismisses, but then upholds the old moralism. A beautiful young woman from the country, Vien, becomes a model with the help of a young photographer, drops him for a more powerful photographer (and foot-fetishist), and is eventually disappointed by the fashion world's corruption. She comes to her own conclusions herself, not heeding her strict older sister.

Viet Nam today is a very different place than it was in the past. Vietnamese identity includes not only the 60% of the population who are under 25 and the 80% who still live in rural areas, but also the hundreds of gay Vietnamese men in genuine Versace and Calvin Klein who gather every Sunday for brunch at the Phuong Cac Café in Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>20</sup> The Communist Party bureaucracy still consists of filmmakers as censors, but they no longer control the

resources. A less over-the-top but still meaningful and appealing mix of socialism and capitalism will therefore perhaps characterize future films from postsocialist Viet Nam.

**Kim Worthy** teaches film studies and literature at Wagner College in New York City. Her writing about Vietnam war films has appeared in *Cineaste*, *Vietnam War Films*, and *The United States and Viet Nam: From War to Peace*.

#### NOTES

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# Takashi Miike's Cinema of Outrage

BY TONY WILLIAMS

Despite Western art cinema audiences' appreciation of canonical works of Japanese cinema as represented by Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Yasujiro Ozu, most devotees tend to forget that a popular cinema existed during the same period, apart from Toho's original *Godzilla* series, which never gained Western attention until fairly recently via cable and DVD/VHS distribution. This cinema co-existed with those prestigious works chosen for screening abroad at film festivals and art house cinemas. They also had much to say about changing social movements within Japanese society in ways similar to those revered works. Takashi Miike's films represent the contemporary incarnation of this vital populist tradition.

Takashi Miike was born in 1960 and has operated entirely within the excessive realms of a populist Japanese cinema not commonly known to the Western world. Miike grew up in the working-class Kawachi District of Osaka whose multicultural associations contrasted with the usual image of Japanese society as a homogenous world of salarymen and demure wives and daughters. Film was not his first career choice. Enthusiastically devoted to pachinko, motorcycles, and rock music, Miike wished to become a rock singer. However, after attending Shohei Imamura's film school in Yokohama, he began working as assistant director on Imamura's *Zegen* (1987) and *Black Rain* (1989) before gradually cutting his teeth as director on direct-to-video films such as *Eye Catch Junction* (*Topuu! Minipato Tai* 1991) and making his feature film debut with *The Third Gangster* (*Daisan no Gokundo* 1995). Miike has worked continually in film, video, and television, changing from one format to another in a manner inconceivable in the West, where talents are usually confined to a particular area and those who combine multiple artistic aspirations are regarded with suspicion. He often takes over recognized genres within Japanese cinema such as gangster movies, historical dramas (*Sabu* 2002), and rock movies (*Andromeda* 1998), working quickly and delivering distinctive excessive touches due to his high speed adrenaline mode of direction. By 1999, Miike had gained international cult status with *Audition* and *Dead or Alive* (both 1999), whose western DVD dis-



tribution owed much to screenings at international film festivals, gaining him the notoriety of acclaim by "fan boy" audiences. However, despite the fact that he is regarded both at home and abroad as a director of "bad taste" films far removed from the art cinema circuit of his more distinguished predecessors such as Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and Ozu, there is much more to his films than the over-the-top qualities hailed by his "fan boy" following.<sup>1</sup>

Takashi Miike's films contain excessive features of cinematic outrage similar to those found in the work of his contemporary Shinya Tsukamoto which often offend Western sensibilities. Born in the same year (1960) in the Shibuya area of Tokyo, Tsukamoto's films such as *Adventures of the Electric Rod Boy* (1987), *Tetsuo* (1990), *Tetsuo 2* (1991), and *Tokyo Fist* (1995) extend "body horror" features associated with the films of David Cronenberg to their most grotesque conclusions with lurid, cybernetic images of bodily transformations evoking contemporary Eastern images of the logical consequences of Freud's worst nightmares. It appears more than coincidental that Miike has cast his contemporary in two of his own films, *Dead or Alive 2* (2000) and *Ichii the Killer* (2001), playing magician Higashino in the first and the devious controller of the title character in the second. Like Miike, Tsukamoto's films have always focused on the family as his recent erotic excursion *A Snake in June* (2002) reveals.<sup>2</sup> Both directors belong to a popular realm of Japanese cinema using lurid styles and themes in an outrageous manner. Yet, unlike the debased figure of Quentin Tarantino, these directors belong to a specific cultural context suggesting that their chosen style is much more serious than most audiences might believe.

Although Miike's films may appear gratuitously violent and pornographic to most Western audiences, they represent a particular cinema of outrage that symbolizes a rapidly changing world facing the Japanese population today in which the worst aspects of globalization and postmodernism have called former values into question. Rather than retreat into the values of past Japanese cinema, Miike's films confront the nihilistic aspects of cultural change by recognizing their dangerous implications. Although the director may appear to condone or enjoy the personal and social chaos he cinematically depicts, his goal involves making his audiences confront these aspects rather than retreat into now anachronistic realms of ideological denial. Miike's films, with certain exceptions, represent a cinema of excess and outrage. But they often contain more than meets the eye on a visceral level.

Miike's films represent a changed world in which the visual overtones of a different type of cinema have expanded and destroyed the former certainties of that once dominant classical Japanese canonical cinema. Although the director has attracted a cult following due to his deliberate employment of a cinema of outrage designed to offend civ-



**Takashi Miike: The director as mischievous prankster thinking of new ways to offend moral values and civilized sensibilities.**

ilized sensibilities, it is important to view his work against a broader cultural and social context.

After 1945, Japan changed rapidly with accelerated developments of cultural and industrial modernism. These changes eventually resulted in the manifestation of a particular form of "crisis cinema" related to the breakdown of economic and traditional modes of behavior. Several directors, such as Juzo Itami (1933-1997) and Takeshi Kitano (1947 - ) have commented on this trend which may be seen at its most devastating in Kinji Fukasaku's critically misunderstood *Battle Royale* (2000). Itami has spoken of problems facing the parochial nature of a Japanese social structure which encloses itself in a very narrow circle avoiding everything outside it.

**You try to get along with others inside the circle and ignore those who are outside it. That's the Japanese way. It makes for a society that is peaceful and orderly. If there are disputes, they can be resolved relatively easily. The weakness of this society is that it has no real connection with the outside world.<sup>3</sup>**



Itami believed the solution involved breaking the circle and looking to the world outside. However, the outside world also involves an ideological arena influenced by post-war models of American culture and industrialism affected by negative as well as supposedly positive democratic ideas as Takeshi Kitano notes. Commenting on the end of a high-growth era following the post-1945 period, Kitano recognizes that imitating the American model has resulted in reproducing its worst features.

**When we look at Japan today and wonder why we have all these problems between parents and children, with drug use - well we just have to look at America and see what kind of country its become, where their form of democracy has taken them. Parents have become scared of their own kids. It used to be that adults would scold kids who were running around and making trouble on the train, but now no one does that. When I was a kid I used to get scolded by adults all the time but that doesn't happen anymore.**

**We've lost the ability to distinguish between right and duties. Now the emphasis is totally on rights - no one talks about duties any more and we're going in a very strange direction as a result.<sup>4</sup>**

Japanese-based American critic Mark Schilling has also noted changes in Japanese cinema and society during the 1990s where younger directors "began taking an new interest in not only Asians, but all minority groups in Japanese society, including Okinawans, *burakumin* (outcasts), gays, and AIDS victims. The obsession of a previous generation of filmmakers with the meaning of Japanese identity in the wake of postwar cultural upheaval and spiritual malaise was giving way to a new awareness of the diversity among Japan's ostensibly homogenous masses."<sup>5</sup>

However, this recognition did not entirely disavow issues of social malaise as many of Takashi Miike's films reveal. In fact, due to the influence of American culture on postwar Japan, several of his films exhibit a globally influenced awareness of a postmodernist aura of nihilism and despair transcending national boundaries.

According to Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard in *A World in Chaos: Social Crisis and the Rise of Postmodern Cinema*, the contemporary era has seen the rise of a particular form of postmodernist cinema characterized by a paranoid vision of a society "shaped by total surveillance and institutional controls obliterating the realm of privacy, free spaces, and social autonomy historically championed by American liberalism."<sup>6</sup> Associated with a pessimistic turn in social and political life, this global postmodernist discourse offers no answer to the deepening crisis in post-capitalist society but instead displays images of Hobbesian disorder characterized by certain disturbing imagery.

**Trapped in the social immediacy of the present, images attached to media culture tend to eviscerate a collective sense of both past and future. A culture thriving on fabricated images and sounds detached from historical context and meaning, it subverts a deeper understanding of**

**social patterns as they unfold over time. Whether the cinematic moment is *Star Wars* or *The Truman Show* or *Titanic* or *Pearl Harbor*, all attention is riveted on the momentary, fleeting, and spectacular even where possibly intended social content is somewhere assimilated into the whole. Personalities, melodramatic scenes, surface images, outlandish actions, and technical flourishes easily crowd out historical narrative, whatever the purported ideological substance. The much celebrated information revolution ends up short-circuited by the colonizing power of all-consuming images intrinsic to contemporary media culture - and to much of what we refer to as postmodern cinema.<sup>7</sup>**

This description could also apply to the cinema of Takashi Miike should we focus exclusively on stylistic outrage and less on certain other features. In that case, his films would form exploitation companion pieces to postmodernist Hollywood counterparts such as *Wag the Dog*, *Bulworth*, and *Primary Colors* (all 1998) which give us "a trenchant critique of a corrupt, decaying social order without any sense of possible alternatives to it" as Boggs and Pollard comment.<sup>8</sup>

Superficially, Miike's films appear firm candidates for inclusion within this category. But, at the same time, his cinema of outrage often focuses on the dark aspects of Japanese society now emerging after the economic and social collapse of the post-war boom, especially those dealing with the oppression of minority groups involving aberrant forms of sexuality and violence used as vicious forms of social control.

Miike's films often feature diverse nationalities "that the mainstream regarded as scum on the Japanese social pond but who were nonetheless more vital than the gray-suited masses who surrounded them. Among them were young Asians who related to their Japanese counterparts on a basis of equality, including their acts of sex and violence."<sup>9</sup>

Takashi Miike is one of those directors who has benefited from the development of OV Cinema, or direct-to-video cinema, resulting not only in a highly productive output to date but also a creative energy displaying excess and outrage. One could easily label him the "Ken Russell" of Japanese cinema were it not for his interrogation of the social world of his culture often having a serious perspective as well as a mischievous desire to offend as many people as possible. Both Russell and Miike aim at extending the visual boundaries of their national cinemas by stylistically excessive means. While Russell attempted to deconstruct the traditional biopic, Miike cinematically undermines the genres and social taboos of his own national cinema visually and thematically by reworking them in challenging ways. His films and interviews reveal him as a cinematic prankster. He welcomes the prolific opportunities allowed him in film, television, and OV-cinema since 1991 to gain relevant experience by engaging in diverse forms of cinematic outrage which are not entirely iconoclastic.

Significantly enough, his cinema of outrage operates on a similar level to the pessimism contained in the comedies of Juzo Itami who also engages in national provocation.



Japanese like getting what you call in English 'reinforcement.' They like to be told that Japanese are wonderful people and that things are just fine the way they are. I'm the opposite. I want to make movies that destroy existing values. My movies have a dose of poison in them - they say that Japanese are no good [laughs]. So I have to make them as comedies, or the dose of poison would be too strong.<sup>10</sup>

Characteristically, most of Miike's work contains vast doses of poison without the benefit of Mary Poppins's "spoonful of sugar" to make "the medicine go down in the most delightful way"! However, the poison may also contain alternative medicinal values suggesting in the minds of audiences different directions that his contemporary *Blade Runner* society could take.

During several of his interviews contained on DVD issues of his work, Miike has spoken of the role of the family in his work in terms paralleling comments of fellow directors such as Itami and Kitano. Although a film such as *Rainy Dog* (1998) follows the gangster film format of his first cinematic feature *The Third Gangster* while extending the sex and violence excesses of *Shinjuku Triad Society* (1995), it also contains a serious undertow. Takashi sets his alienated Japanese hitman (played by generic regular and favorite actor Sho Aikawa) in Taiwan. One day, the loner finds himself a reluctant parent when his ex-girlfriend leaves him with a little boy she claims is his son. Although initially

treating him as a stray dog, he ends up by forming a family with the boy and a woman as he is hunted by a rival gang. Shot before Kitano's *Kikujiro* (1999), the theme exhibits a common cultural concern. Ironically, Miike's dark iconoclastic version of Pasolini's *Theorem*, *Visitor Q* (2001), has the outsider reuniting a dysfunctional family rather than dispersing it. This concept of attempting a return to former values also occurs in Takashi's second installment of the *Dead or Alive* trilogy, *Dead or Alive 2: Birds* (2000), whose sub-title evokes his 1998 fantastic feature *The Bird People in China*. This film dealt with a Japanese salaryman and yakuza who discover a utopian society in southwestern China populated by a tribe whose children grow wings. As Schilling comments, it evokes themes contained in one of the earliest films dealing with outsiders in Japan - Nobuhiko Obayashi's *Beijing Watermelon* (*Pekinteki Suika* 1989), namely "that, in their pursuit of prosperity, Japanese have somehow lost sight of the values that made them human, and that it is up to other poorer Asians, whose hearts are still unsullied by materialism, to remind them of what is important. By the end both the salaryman and the yakuza have begun to spread their own wings. In the land where Japanese culture began, they have finally found their spiritual home."<sup>11</sup>

However, Miike's perspective is highly multifaceted. His one musical to date, *The Happiness of the Katakuris* (2001), celebrates his own dark version of dysfunctional family values. But it reaches a transcendent musical utopian climax with the family outside society celebrating the natu-

Sho Aikawa in *Dead or Alive*.







*Ichi the Killer*: An apocalyptic world of postmodern violence.

ral death of the grandfather. His well-known *Dead or Alive* trilogy has its own specific perspectives.

Featuring generic stalwarts Sho Aikawa and Riki Takeuchi, *Dead or Alive* (1999) might appear to be another entry in Japanese cinema's prolific *yakuza-eiga* gangster genre. But the opening sequence bombards viewers with an MTV visual cocktail suggesting that the film will be "something completely different." After this beginning in the Kabukicho district of Tokyo (the Japanese equivalent to the Triad-dominated territory of Tsimshatshui in Hong Kong cinema) mixing violence, sexuality, and food to visually Rabelaisian excess, Miike then "appears" to offer his unsuspecting viewer traditional generic fare. The narrative deceptively seems to employ the usual melodramatic forms employed by the gangster film interspersed with moments of mischievous excess. *Dead or Alive* contrasts Aikawa's honest cop to Ryu'ichi/ Riki Takeuchi's gangster grandson of a Chinese "war orphan." But, like *City of Lost Souls* (2000) and his other films, Miike recognizes that changing times have affected the image Japan normally presents to the world. One of Miike's most outrageous scenes involves a gangster drowning a female in a tub filled with her own shit as a result of a deliberately engineered drug overdose. Although this appears offensive to the tastes of most audiences,

Miike's *modus operandi* in this example of his cinema of outrage involves taking the *yakuza-eiga*'s traditional treatment of women to its logical conclusions and confronting his audience with the dark implications of this theme. As Schilling comments, the Japanese gangster movie is generally regarded as a "disreputable genre whose real-life models are mainly thugs with retrograde ideas about women, minorities, the emperor, and nearly everything under the sun."<sup>12</sup> This is one of several disturbing features in Takashi Miike's cinema of outrage making it much more than a postmodernist mindless celebration of excessive violence.

Both of the protagonists in *Dead or Alive* care for family members but lose them in a world of arbitrary violence. Ryu'ichi greets his younger brother Toji/ Michisuke Kashiwaya who has returned from a college education in the USA which he has funded. On his return, Ryu'ichi takes Toji to his parents' graveyard located in a muddy industrial wasteland. However, Ryu'ichi sees the eventual contamination of his brother by the yakuza way of life which eventually leads to his death. Toji vainly attempts to break away from his brother's violent world.

The films of Takashi Miike never operate on a didactic level. But, sometimes, significant sequences exist within his work suggesting different directions for characters trapped





*City of Lost Souls: The Multicultural Nightmare of Globalization.*

within an urban hell that not only makes them violent beings but also destroys a younger generation who have no hope of breaking away.<sup>13</sup> Tojima, *Dead or Alive*'s honest cop, struggles to raise 20 million yen to send his teenage daughter for a heart transplant operation in the United States. He succumbs to temptation when he borrows the money from a local yakuza *oyabun* before Ryu'ichi's revenge enables him to break free of his obligation. Before this happens, Toji's return to help his brother during this violent attack leads to his death. Similarly, Tojima becomes responsible for the death of his partner in the incident leading to the bereavement of the latter's wife and young son. Violence begets violence leading to the poignant destruction of the most vulnerable characters. Tojima's hopes for the future are also destroyed when he sees his wife and daughter blown up by a car bomb planted by Ryu'ichi.

The final moments of the film initially suggest a formulaic *Dirty Harry* combat between cop and villain. Yet Miike not only implodes the confrontation from within but explodes his entire narrative moving from generic convention to excess until dark fantastic imagery finally overpowers the sequence. On one level, it appears like a retreat to *manga*. But it is much more serious and better developed than Tarantino's gratuitous distracting excursion in *Kill*

*Bill: Volume One* (2003). The final movements never appear arbitrary. They form part of a changing generic dimension that can only end in Miike's own version of Jean-Luc Godard's "Fin du Cinema." The antagonists face each other in a scenario which moves continually from one apocalyptic level of violence to another until cosmic destruction represents the only logical way in which this particular crisis cinema narrative can end. *Dead or Alive*'s excessive elements of male violence have disastrous global consequences.

Miike understood that he could not make an actual "sequel" to *Dead or Alive*. Instead, he pursued its implications in other directions. Featuring his stars in different roles, *Dead or Alive 2: The Birds* (2000) represents the director's iconoclastic appropriation of a style resembling Latino "magical realism." This explains his deliberate departure from the excessive features of the earlier film. Miike's cinema of outrage occasionally appears in this film. But it becomes subordinated to a more muted narrative which might disappoint viewers expecting another excessive *Dead or Alive* sequel repeating the apocalyptic elements contained in the original film's climax. Opening sequences show a young boy who mysteriously changes into hit man Mizuki/Sho Aikawa. But the opening caption of the film, "Where are you?" is one of many graphic interrogative





*Blade Runner*: An influential text for contemporary Japanese popular cinema.

inserts. It questions Mizuki's adult involvement in his deadly profession after juxtaposing two images of his youthful self and a cosmic landscape showing the moon and the earth. Gangster boss Higashino/ Shinya Tsukamoto significantly performs a magical routine involving two cigarette packs representing warring factions of yakuza and Triads as he commissions Mizuki for an assassination. But his mission becomes usurped by Shu/Riki Takeuchi. Pursued by both sides, Mizuki and Shu leave the urban landscape in fantastic imagery evoking the final scenes of *Dead or Alive* until they meet each other on a ferry going to a rural south Japanese island.

*Dead or Alive 2* not only evokes the brief idyllic world of Takeshi Kitano's *Sonatine* (1993), or "gangsters at the seashore" as it is popularly known, but also an alternative

world of magic having much to do with an past world of non-violent childhood both major characters have left behind. As Higashino significantly comments, "The whole world loves magic, you know." *Dead or Alive 2* provides a magical alternative to the excessively violent world represented by Miike's other films such as *Fudoh: The New Generation* (1996), *Full Metal Yakuza* (1997), and *Ich i the Killer* (2001). As in *Dead or Alive*, both men are *alter egos*. They also represent different historical incarnations of the yakuza gangster figure as well as being boyhood friends from the same rural island. Mizuki wears the anachronistic aloha shirt seen on gangsters in earlier yakuza films while also incongruously having his hair dyed blonde in modern fashion.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Shu's more adult modern attire, the shirt also represents the world of childhood Mizuki has



supposedly left behind. As Higashino notes, "You're not a kid anymore, jerk." Both Mizuki and Shu are mistaken for the same person by the Japanese underworld in the opening ten minutes of the film evoking the blood brotherhood bonding begun in *Dead or Alive* which *Dead or Alive: Final* (2002) will continue.

The film intersperses flashbacks to the earlier life of the main characters who often transform back into their younger selves. They also sport angelic wings in one scene. Mizuki and Shu begin as isolated individuals who later recognize each other as former childhood friends. Both characters have been "branded to kill" by their adult professions and have no other destination except hell. They finally decide to use their skills to aid starving children throughout the world - a humanitarian gesture which may seem unusual in this director's cinema but having a particular relevance here as documentary shots of starving African children reveal.

Rather than again recreate his imaginative urban Kabukicho fantasy world, Miike uses beautiful location scenes of a rural southern Japanese island where the two characters grew up together in a Catholic orphanage before the young Mizuki mysteriously left for Osaka. It is an Edenic world they have lost after becoming adults in an urban jungle. They encounter a childhood friend (played by Kenichi Endo who portrayed the warped father in *Visitor Q*). Unlike his later urban counterpart, he is happy in his surroundings and is an expectant father. His role reinforces Miike's frequent comments about the important role of the family in his films. It certainly occupies a key position here. While Mizuki, Shu, and others perform a children's pantomime in their innocent rural world, Miike uses obvious Eisenstein-influenced montage cuts to reveal the bloody urban activities of their counterparts. During the performance, Shu appears as a lion with Mizuki as a water imp - two figures from the gentle non-urban world of Japanese mythology. The contrast between different worlds is as deliberate as the *October*-like influence of the frequently interspersed graphic question, "Where are you going?" throughout the film. It last appears after the shot of a new baby boy who may soon grow up to be "branded to kill" like his deceased adult uncles. When Mizuki and Shu finally return to their idyllic island paradise to die, Miike again juxtaposes images of their past youthful and adult appearances before the final shots show their younger selves reunited again in a utopian non-urban community before dying.

The final scene also complements those touching progressive values contained in Miike's most positive and unusual work *The Bird People in China*. Although the director may belong to the late baby boomer phase of post-war Japan who benefited from the economic miracle, his views concerning the changes capitalist values have made on his society are by no means celebratory.

*Dead or Alive: Final* (2002) concludes the trilogy in its own distinctive way. Opening with sequences from old silent South East Asian fantasy and martial arts films, *Dead or Alive: Final* displays Yokohama's post-apocalyptic world of A.D. 2346 where nothing has really changed. Far from celebrating the future as a utopian arena of globalization,

Miike depicts it as a bleak environment where the same oppressive forces dominate the landscape as they do in his contemporary yakuza films. He contrasts the naive futuristic visions contained in the opening scenes with a grim reality calling into question utopian visions of a future in which things supposedly will get better. Miike presents his leading actors as opposing figures as in the first film. But, they are again complementary opposites. Riki Takeuchi's "Deckard" character Takeshi Honda now pursues Sho Aikawa's "Roy Batty" replicant surrogate Ryo in a world dominated by the Tyrell figure of corrupt Mayor Wu/Richard Chen.<sup>15</sup> They exist in a world in which past and present co-exist in bleak postmodernist imagery. For example, Miike includes a bullet-trajectory homage to Ringo Lam's *Full Contact* (1992) but allows Ryo to deflect the threat in a traditionally generic manner. When a bullet moves towards Honda, he deflects it with a wooden handled samurai sword similar to actions performed by actors Bunta Sagawara and Takakura Ken in classic yakuza movies of the 60s and 70s.

Like *Blade Runner* and *Heroic Trio 2: The Executioners* (1993), the causes of the apocalypse remain mysterious until Wu informs Honda that overpopulation led to a war which destroyed the environment. "We must not make the same mistake again." Wu manufactures a drug aimed at controlling the population. But his chosen subjects are Chinese rather than Japanese. Since Cantonese speaking characters such as gangleader Fong (played by Los Angeles-raised Amerasian actor Terence Yin, Miike's equivalent of Hong Kong cinema's Michael Fitzgerald Wong), who also speaks to Ryo in American-accented English, are outsiders in this society, the director suggests that the apocalyptic war may have echoed that earlier period of Japanese expansion into China. This history is still a taboo topic in contemporary Japan. Such meanings appear possible in a director whose social insights often resemble those contained within Kinji Fukasaku's earlier generic and historical explorations in the *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* series (1973-1974). Mayor Wu exerts his own form of population control upon the Chinese population of Yokohama who are not only treated as a despised underclass but also subjected to atrocities reminiscent of war crimes perpetuated during the infamous Rape of Nanking in 1937. Furthermore, although Miike's future world contains multi-cultural features as in *City of Lost Souls* (2000), his vision undermines one of the celebratory images of the postmodern condition. Cultural and linguistic mergers do not necessarily guarantee human freedom as violent apocalyptic imagery in *City of Lost Souls* and *Dead or Alive 3* demonstrate.

Miike's revelation concerning the "blood brother" identities of his two leading stars makes explicit elements contained in the trilogy's earlier installments. Like their former counterparts, Ryo and Honda are father figures in several ways forming deep bonds with their adoptive and actual sons. Ryo understands that he belongs to an "old world" in which his opponents were both humans and replicants. But, like Roy Batty, he has human feelings. "Although I'm a robot, I still wish the battle would end and I could go home." While Honda finally discovers that his revered



family life is merely a programmed lie, Ryo eventually forms a touching nuclear family bonding with Fong's bereaved girlfriend Jun. But this cannot last. After repeating a montage of scenes from the earlier films, both Ryo and Honda move towards that final confrontation towards which they have been programmed. Both finally return "home" when they ironically recognize that "destruction is our source of life." They battle each other and become incarnated symbiotically. The final scenes reveal a deadly avenging robotic angel giving those briefly-seen angelic figures in *Dead or Alive 2* a new twist as Miike concludes his trilogy with his reunited heroes about to take revenge on Mayor Wu.

Like the rest of Miike's films, the *Dead or Alive* trilogy can not be entirely defined as either self-indulgent or a nihilistic postmodernist celebration of cinematic excess. Global blurring of boundaries never involves positive utopias. Yet the future direction of Miike's work remains ambiguous. It may suffer recuperation by nihilistic postmodernist discourses if style, rather than substance, takes center stage. As Art Black comments, critics generally tend to concentrate on "Miike's bravura sequences, his stark surreality and apocalyptic vision, his tour-de-force rapidfire editing that makes the opening of the film look like an amphetaminized trailer for itself, and the bold, imaginative violence that has become Miike's trademark. The surface, the gloss, the astonishingly graphic showmanship was so striking - and still is - that it tends to mask Miike's subtexts and abiding personal concerns."<sup>16</sup>

These concerns certainly exist as Miike's recent outrage *Gozu: A Yakuza Horror Story* (2003) reveals. While fastidious viewers might react in a manner recalling earlier reviews of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), this would lose sight of important connections between style and substance. Miike has displayed an iconoclastic version of closet homosocial elements common to classical Hollywood gangster films such as *Little Caesar* (1931) and later examples such as *The Pawnbroker* (1965) as well as the traditional yakuza movie. In many ways, it is a dark cinematic version of elements contained in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1980s study of homosexual elements in classic literary texts appropriately titled *Between Men*. Like the rest of Miike's work, *Gozu* reveals new directions. If he can develop the stylistic forms of his cinema of outrage into the type of social critique represented by Fukasaku's *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* and *Battle Royale*, some significant achievements may result. His recent films suggest some promise. During 2002, Miike remade Fukasaku's bleak classic 1975 gangster film *Graveyard of Honor*, updating it from the original war and postwar era to reflect the equally dehumanized and violent era of the Japanese economic miracle and the unexpected recession of the 1990s. Miike also shot a humanistic comedy, *Shangri-La* in the same year, about the residents of a homeless camp who help an unemployed printer return to his business and former life. The title of this film also echoes themes within *The Bird People of China*, as well as Miike's stated concerns of the necessity of returning to a more humane form of society while at the same

time expressing a deep awareness of how problematic this goal actually is.<sup>17</sup>

Dedicated to *Oyabun* Weisser of Florida and *Kobun* Lewis of Illinois.

**Tony Williams** is Professor and Area Head of Film Studies in the Department of English at Southern Illinois University. He has recently written *The Cinema of George Romero* (Wallflower Press, 2003) and *Body and Soul: The Cinematic Vision of Robert Aldrich* (forthcoming).

#### NOTES

- 1 For a good introduction to Miike's work see Tom Mes, *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike*. London: FAB Press, 2004. I express thanks to Ms. Gabrielle Kang for loaning me her copy.
- 2 See Tom Mes, "Shinya Tsukamoto Interview," <http://www.MidnightEye.com>. 10.23.2002; Mes, "A Snake in June," op.cit.
- 3 "Juzo Itami," Mark Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film*. New York: Weatherill, 1999, 76. Significant comparisons may be made with certain Western forms of "crisis cinema." See here *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*. Ed. Christopher Sharrett. Washington, D.C.: Maissoneuve Press, 1993.
- 4 Schilling, p. 100. Kitano's comments equally apply to Nikkatsu Studio's *Subway Serial Rape* series (1985-1988) which often contrast graphic assault on females with passengers who passively sit and watch the proceedings. Despite the unwholesome nature of these scenes director Suji Kataoka clearly condemns the passengers who never intervene to help the women. See Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser. *The Sex Films: Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia*. Miami, Florida: Vital Books, Inc. 1998, pp. 421-422.
- 5 Schilling, p. 45.
- 6 Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, *A World in Chaos: Social Crisis and the Rise of Postmodern Cinema*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2003, p. 13)
- 7 Boggs and Pollard, 29. However, for an excellent critique of the nihilistic dimensions of postmodernism see *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*. Eds. Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997.
- 8 Boggs and Pollard, p. 129.
- 9 Schilling, p. 50.
- 10 Schilling, pp. 81-82.
- 11 Schilling, p. 50.
- 12 Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book: A Guide to Japanese Gangster Films*. Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 2003, p. 11.
- 13 *Fudoh: The New Generation* (1996) is another grim example of this theme which drastically destroys the traditional myths of family loyalty to exhibit instead a grim social Darwinist world which violently consumes the younger generation.
- 14 Such merging of traditional and contemporary styles is obviously deliberate. As Schilling comments, the dyed blonde hair represents the mark of defiance on the part of a Japanese Generation X figure "whose interests were often intensely, even bizarrely, personal, rather than being group-orientated and socially sanctioned. Their resistance to the conforming pressures of Japanese society manifested itself more in small individual gestures of defiance—dying one's hair blonde or eating fast food on commuter trains—than in organized acts of protest." See *Contemporary Japanese Film*, p. 37.
- 15 For the influence of *Blade Runner* on contemporary Japanese cinema see Schilling, 36, pp. 47-48). For its role as a cultural symbol of contemporary American postmodernist malaise see Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*. New York: Henry Holt, chapter 7; p. 363, Boggs and Pollard, p. 247. In their review of *Blade Runner*, the authors note a key feature that will have later relevance both to contemporary Japanese cinema and *Dead or Alive 3*. "Deckard is cold and detached by nature, having inspired the name "sushi" given to him by his ex-wife." (p. 254) Mayor Wu and the new female recruit in Honda's team later criticize him for his workaholic tendencies which distance him from an appropriate loving relationship with his actual family.
- 16 Art Black, "The Films of Takashi Miike." *Japanese Cinema Essential Handbook*. 5th edition. Eds. Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser. Miami, Florida: Vital Books, 2003, p.416.
- 17 See "Takashi Miike Interview (August 2000)," Mark Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p.81.



# Indigenous Feature Films

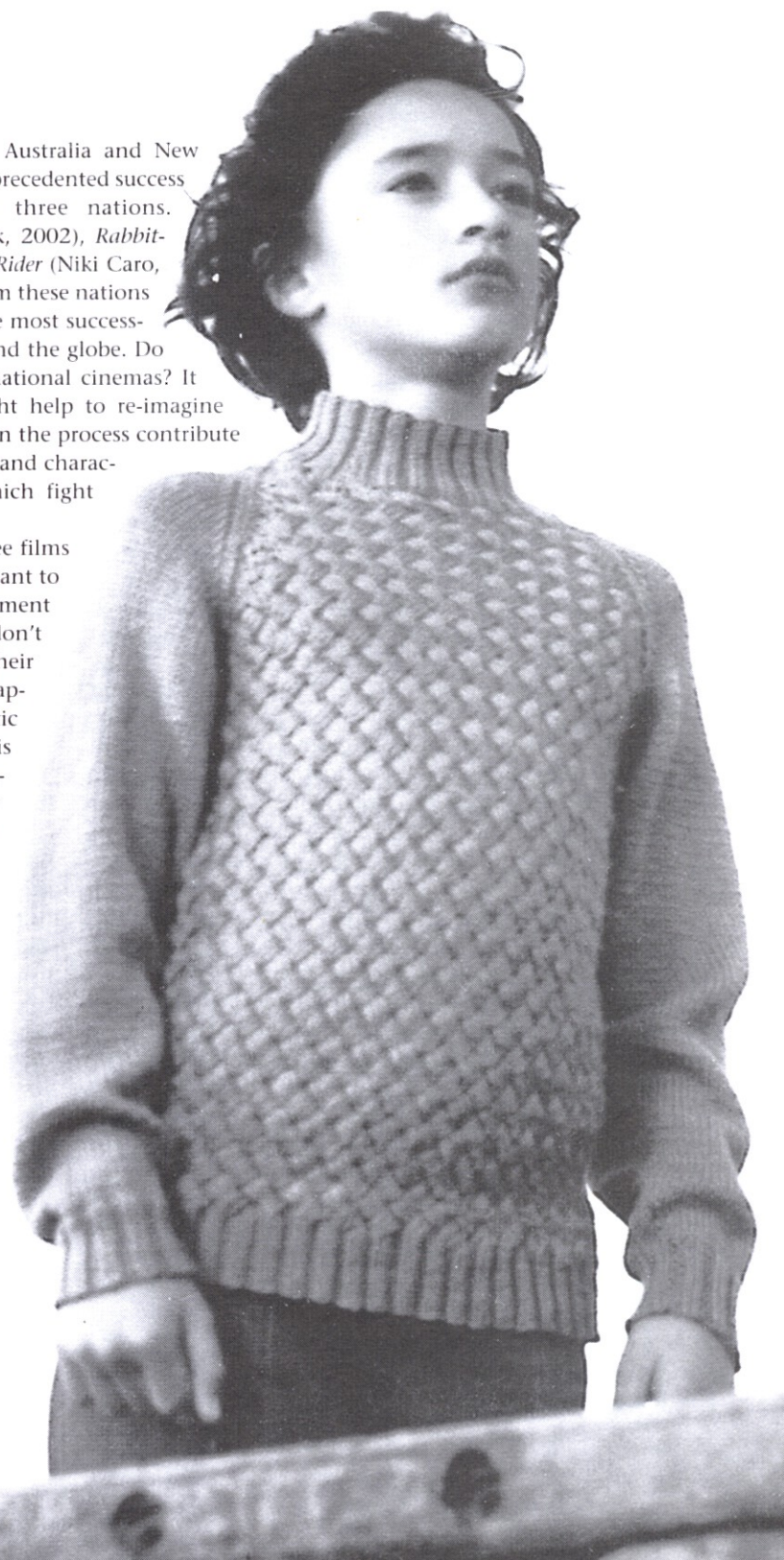
A NEW HOPE FOR NATIONAL CINEMAS?

BY JENNIFER L. GAUTHIER

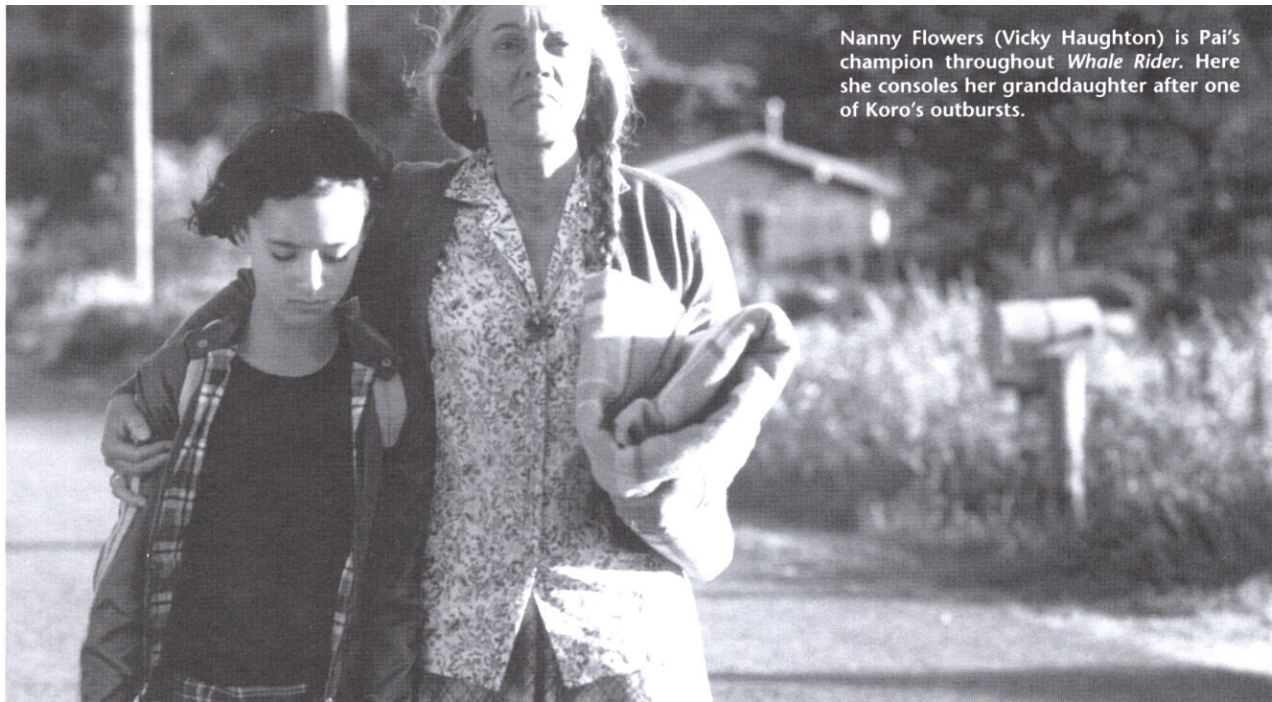
As an observer of the cinemas of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, I have recently been struck by the unprecedented success of indigenous feature films from these three nations. *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk, 2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), and *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2003) are the first indigenous feature films from these nations to reach mass audiences. They are perhaps the most successful indigenous features from any nation around the globe. Do these successes suggest a new direction for national cinemas? It seems possible that indigenous cinema might help to re-imagine national cinema in the new millennium and in the process contribute to new understandings of the distinct culture and character of various English-speaking cinemas, which fight Hollywood for attention and audiences.

Some critics have suggested that these three films shamelessly cater to Western audiences who want to congratulate themselves on their enlightenment and concern for "disappearing cultures." I don't agree that this is what the films suggest – their very point is that these cultures have not disappeared. Marshaling their stylistic and thematic guns, they force the audience's attention to this fact, startling viewers who believe that indigenous peoples have been largely wiped out or that they have no recognizable role to play in modern society. *Atanarjuat*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Whale Rider* launch a project of remembering; un-covering aspects of the colonial past with their close attention to indigenous culture. In doing so, they open up national cinema to voices that have long been silent (silenced), specifically aboriginal voices. The power of voice is enacted in varying ways in these three films; in two, indigenous people speak directly to the audience in voiceover narration or in documentary footage, while in the third, an indigenous filmmaker and

RIGHT: Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes) contemplates her destiny in *Whale Rider*.







Nanny Flowers (Vicky Haughton) is Pai's champion throughout *Whale Rider*. Here she consoles her granddaughter after one of Koro's outbursts.

his team of indigenous actors and crew re-create a forgotten culture for the viewer. *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Atanarjuat*, and *Whale Rider* provide a re-vitalized vision for national cinema by embracing previously denied cultural roots and highlighting the multiplicities within the nation. The films urge not only a re-imagining of national cinema, but also a re-imagining of their respective nations as a whole, begging the question of how far they have come as postcolonial cultures.

Noyce, an Australian director who has worked in Hollywood for twelve years (*Patriot Games* [1992], *Clear and Present Danger* [1994], and *The Quiet American* [2002], among others), returned to his native land to make *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The film is based on a book, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, written in 1996 by Doris Pilkington Garimara. Garimara's text relates the story of how her mother survived Australia's aboriginal relocation program in the 1930s. Along with her sister Daisy and her cousin Gracie, Doris's mother, Molly walked over 1500 miles across the nation from an Aboriginal work camp to her home in the bush, following the fence that protects Australia's farmland from rabbits. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* has received acclaim both inside Australia and beyond. It garnered three Australian Film Institute awards, including Best Film, and Noyce was named Director of the Year by the National Board of Review.

Canada's *Atanarjuat*, or *The Fast Runner* is the first feature film made in Inuktitut, an Inuit language. Produced by Igloolik Isuma Productions, the first Inuit production company, the film features an all-Inuit cast and a predominantly Inuit crew. Director Zacharias Kunuk and his team (Paul Apak Angilirq, Paul Qulitalik, and cameraman Norman Cohn) have produced a number of films for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation that document aspects of Inuit culture, including *Qaggiq* (*Gathering Place*, 1990) and *Saputi* (*Fish Traps*, 1993). *Atanarjuat* re-creates a traditional Inuit fable addressing community ties, religion and individual responsibility. Since its premiere it has won numerous national and international awards including six Genie Awards in Canada, Best Canadian Film at the Toronto International Film Festival, and the Camera d'Or

at Cannes for Best First Feature Film.

Like *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Whale Rider* is based on a book by an indigenous author, Maori writer, Witi Ihimaera. It tells the story of a young Maori girl, Pai/Keisha Castle-Hughes, as she struggles to gain the respect of her grandfather, who is searching for a leader to guide the tribe and preserve Maori values in the modern world. The film was directed by Pakeha (White European) New Zealander, Niki Caro; it is her second feature film and it has garnered attention and awards all over the world, including the People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, the Audience Award for World Cinema at Sundance and the Independent Spirit Award for Best Foreign Film. Perhaps most notable to Western audiences was its Academy Award Nomination for Best Supporting Actor for Castle-Hughes.

Australia, Canada and New Zealand share an abiding interest in maintaining a distinct national cinema tradition in the face of American cinematic hegemony. They also face similar problems in gaining access to audiences as a result of Hollywood's monopoly on distribution and exhibition. In all three nations, the state has tried a variety of strategies to encourage and support feature filmmaking within the nation. Australian national cinema was officially launched in 1969 with the Australian Film Development Corporation, followed in subsequent years by the Australian Film Commission (AFC) and the Film Finance Corporation (FFC). While Canada's national cinema was born in 1939 with the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), it wasn't until the 1970s that nationally-funded feature films were produced. The Canadian Film Development Corporation, now known as Telefilm Canada, spearheads the feature film industry in Canada. The New Zealand Film Commission was founded much later, in 1978, and has not had as wide-ranging an approach to film production as have Australia and Canada. More recently all three nations have renewed their commitment to feature filmmaking with various increases in funding and new regulations concerning appropriation of funds.

Despite these historical initiatives, indigenous filmmaking



*Whale Rider*: Pai and her grandfather (Rawiri Paratene) in a happy moment.



ing has had meager support from all three national cinemas. Indigenous filmmakers in Canada and Australia have historically had better success working in the documentary and experimental modes. Alanis Obomsawin is Canada's best-known First Nations filmmaker. She has made several feature-length documentaries chronicling the Canadian government's mistreatment of various First Nations tribes, including *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993). The national cinema renaissance in Australia in the 1970s featured several notable features made by White directors that dealt with Aboriginal issues including Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (1977), Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) and Nicholas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1971).<sup>1</sup> Until recently, Tracey Moffatt was the only Aboriginal Australian filmmaker to have gained critical attention. Her films, *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987), *Night Cries – A Rural Tragedy* (1989), and *bedevil* (1993) draw upon the avant-garde tradition to explore issues of postcolonialism and aboriginal identity development. In the past few years, other aboriginal filmmakers have garnered national (and international) acclaim for their work: Ivan Sen for *Beneath Clouds* (2002) and Rachel Perkins for *Radiance* (1998) and *One Night the Moon* (2001).

A number of films made by Maori have come out of New Zealand, despite its small size. Barry Barclay pioneered Maori filmmaking in the contemporary context with his films, *Ngati* (1986), *Te Rua* (1991) and the made-for-TV docudrama, *The Feathers of Peace* (2000). Merata Mita has made both features and documentaries, including *Patu!* (1981), which chronicled the outbreaks of violence that met the South African rugby team, the Springboks, as they toured New Zealand. *Once Were Warriors* (1994), directed by Lee Tamahori was until recently the most successful film at the New Zealand box office ever.<sup>2</sup> Less widely known is the *The Maori Merchant of Venice* (2002), directed by Maori Shakespearean actor, Don Selwyn. The film is based on an adaptation of the play translated into the Maori language by a Maori scholar in 1945, and it has won awards in both New Zealand and at the Hawaii International Film Festival. Although the film has had problems gaining wide release, a

multi-language DVD is apparently in production.

Considering the historical record for indigenous feature films in these three nations, the recent success of *Atanarjuat*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Whale Rider* is all the more exciting. The films have more than pure entertainment value; they share an intense focus on the clash of cultures that characterizes postcolonial societies. Their narratives work to recover aspects of indigenous culture that have been lost or forgotten in contemporary society and this effort suggests a renewed project for national cinema. *Atanarjuat* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* highlight historical instances of the mistreatment of indigenous peoples, calling attention to portions of the nation's history that have been elided. *Whale Rider* locates its action in the contemporary moment, chronicling the impact of years of Pakeha influence on Maori culture. The films share not only an overarching project, but also thematic concerns such as land, family and tradition, implicating these as specific sites of culture clash.

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* explicitly addresses the clash of cultures in its colonization narrative. Basing the film on Garimara's memoir, Noyce uses one woman's personal history to unearth the colonial history of the nation. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* reveals the experiences of a group of Aboriginals now known as "The Stolen Generation."<sup>3</sup> Since the European settlement of Australia, it was common practice to remove Aboriginal children from their families. In 1905 Western Australia passed an Aborigines Act, which entrusted a Chief Protector with the legal guardianship of all Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal people in that territory. Children were placed in work camps with the stated goal of improving their self-respect and making them useful to society. The policy was clearly aimed at breeding out Aboriginal blood and culture.

This goal is vividly demonstrated by a scene in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* featuring Chief Protector A.O. Neville/Kenneth Branagh, presenting a slide show to a group of well-meaning, upper class, white women. Neville is colonialism embodied; during the presentation, he suggests that he



wants to give Aboriginal children "the benefit of everything our culture has to offer." Describing an "unwanted third race," the half-caste children, Neville declares that as their "Protector" it is his job to see that they are "advanced" and "absorbed into the white population." He demonstrates his project with a slide showing three generations of Aborigines, each face lighter and more European in its features. Revealing his master plan, to effect the transition from one-half, to one-quarter, to octoroon, he states simply, "after three generation there is no trace of the native origin." The black is, as he says, "stamped out," or "bred out." The practice of taking Aboriginal children from their families continued through the mid-1970s and was only fully acknowledged in a 1997 government report entitled, "Bringing Them Home."<sup>4</sup>

Noyce's opening scenes powerfully suggest the conflicts that characterize Aboriginal life and serve to establish the ongoing tension in the film between Aboriginal culture and Australian law. The film's overall structure is defined by a back and forth movement between shots of Aboriginal people in their natural surroundings and scenes of Neville in his government office. This struggle between local culture and government policy is established at the outset of the film. In contrast to the idyllic images of family life is the family's reliance on the supplies provided by the state through the police depot. When a bell is rung, Molly's mother, Maude/Ningali Lawford, goes to collect her blankets and food staples from the guard. The depot, symbol of the Aboriginals' lost self-sufficiency, later becomes the site of the abduction of the three girls. During this scene the soundtrack emphasizes Maude's disempowerment. Her screams mingle with the screams of camels, while the constable repeats, "It's the law Maude, you've got no say," and waves a piece of paper bearing an official-looking stamp in her face. Loud drum music emphasizes the extreme emotion of the situation as the girls are literally torn out of their mother's arms and ripped from their homeland.

Aboriginal Australians' connection to the land is made explicit throughout *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. With his opening shots, Noyce portrays Molly's/Everlyn Sampi family as close to nature; in their brown clothing they almost disappear into the land's exposed soil. We see Molly catch a goanna for the family's meal – she is good at it, quick, fearless, and strong. These scenes underscore the necessity of having a close relationship to the land; it is ultimately through her familiarity with the geography of her homeland that Molly is able to find her way home across 1500 miles of outback. She successfully evades an Aboriginal tracker using several methods, including planning her escape to coincide with a rainstorm, walking through a river, and dragging a branch across her tracks.

The opening scenes of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* also establish the closeness of the family, and the necessity of familial bonds to Aboriginal survival. Molly takes charge of her sister and cousin, leading their escape from the Moore River settlement and caring for them on the journey. At one point, Daisy/Tianna Sansbury decides to go her own way, and although Molly follows her, she is too late to prevent Daisy's capture by White authorities. Molly and

Gracie/Laura Monaghan continue home across the desert; meanwhile, Molly's mother and grandmother have gathered at the rabbit-proof fence to guide the girls with songs and chanting. The bonds of family are not broken by physical separation, but endure and pull Molly and Gracie back home. When Molly arrives, the first thing she says is, "I lost one." Her regret at not having kept the family together tempers her joy.

While *Rabbit-Proof Fence* locates its story in the clash between White and Aboriginal societies, *Atanarjuat* and *Whale Rider* focus exclusively on indigenous communities; no white characters appear in either film (save for a minor character who appears late in *Whale Rider*). Through this absence the films evoke the contemporary tensions that exist between the indigenous and white populations in both nations. While *Atanarjuat* re-imagines the time before colonization of the Arctic by white explorers, it also suggests the impact of White settlers on Inuit culture, by vividly presenting just what has been lost. In the 1940s and 50s, the federal government began to herd the nomadic Inuit into permanent settlements, primarily by taking children from their families and putting them into residential schools; families were forced to move into the settlements or remain separated from their children. This process institutionalized the de-culturation that had been taking place since Christian missionaries had come to the Arctic in the mid-nineteenth century. Scholars describe this process as "welfare colonialism;" the Inuits' nomadic life was disrupted, their traditional hunting skills became obsolete, and their language and culture were suppressed.<sup>5</sup> The mistreatment of the Inuit echoes that of Aboriginals in Australia, and like *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Atanarjuat* has forced people to confront these shameful aspects of national history that have been forgotten (or ignored) for many years.

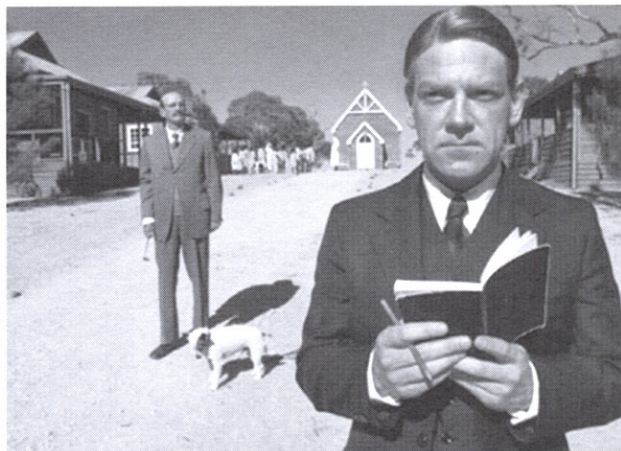
Kunuk, like Noyce favors large landscape shots that dwarf his characters, vividly portraying the struggle for survival that the Inuit endure in the upper regions of Canada. Cohn's camera work captures the frigid quality of the Arctic with blinding shots of white snow and vast frames filled with nothing but frozen tundra. Like the Aboriginals' lives in Australia, the lives of the Inuit are marked by a partnership with the natural environment. Throughout the film we see shots of the family members carving out sustenance from what seems like a desolate landscape. As *Atanarjuat*'s wife, Atuut/Sylvia Ivalu searches for food in a seemingly barren field, we see her discover small purple flowers and nibble on a few as she collects them for a meal. As the film demonstrates, it is a constant struggle to find sustenance and to survive in the cold. Their intimate knowledge of the land and its offerings ensure their survival, as they do Molly's in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

Perhaps the most evident connection between the Inuit and the land is demonstrated in *Atanarjuat*'s famous running sequence, which gives the film its title. When his rival, Oki/ Peter-Henry Arnatsiaq comes to kill him, *Atanarjuat* escapes and takes off running (naked) across the ice. He survives, and is cared for by a family, who helps him to recover. His miraculous feat suggests the delicate balance that characterizes the relationship between his tribe and the nat-





*Rabbit-Proof Fence*: Molly (Everlyn Sampi), Daisy (Tianna Sansbury), and Gracie (Laura Monaghan) making their way back home through the Australian outback.



*Rabbit-Proof Fence*: Chief Protector, A.O. Neville (Kenneth Branagh) visits the Moore River Settlement to check up on "his" girls.

ural world in which they live. Moreover, this experience in nature marks him in a powerful way and when he returns to the tribe he instigates a reconciliation with his enemies, calling for an end to the killing.

The film dramatizes an important Inuit fable, which begins with a visit from a shaman who lets loose an evil spirit into a tight family grouping resulting in the humiliation and ostracizing of one of the men. Through the telling of this fable, the film highlights the shared values that structure Inuit culture, specifically the sense of respect for the larger good of the community. Kinship is perhaps the most important aspect of Inuit culture, particularly in a place where daily life is very difficult and cooperation is essential for survival. The fable highlights not only the role of family, but also the role of religion, which was altered through colonization. When the Christian missionaries gathered the Inuit to "civilize" them, shamanism was denounced as a pagan activity. As Kunuk describes, "When Christianity came, they didn't allow us to do drum dancing or storytelling. [They told us] 'These acts are the work of the devil' and it sort of died."<sup>6</sup> By uncovering this aspect of colonialism in discussions surrounding the film, Kunuk suggests a new goal for national cinema — one that encourages people to re-examine their national history and culture, just as *Rabbit-Proof Fence* does for Australians.

*Whale Rider* does not explicitly address issues of colonization, but the powerful influence of the Pakeha world is ever present despite the absence of White characters. The culture clash is perhaps most clearly embodied in the character Porourangi/Cliff Curtis, Pai's father, who left the Maori community after the death of his wife and son, who was Pai's twin. Rather than stay and be a leader to his tribe, he lives in Germany and pursues his career as an artist working within the Western tradition of formalism. He and his father, Koro/Rawiri Paratene are at odds whenever he visits; his father's disappointment with his choice to live in the Pakeha world is oppressive. The film's narrative foregrounds the important role of family in Maori culture and

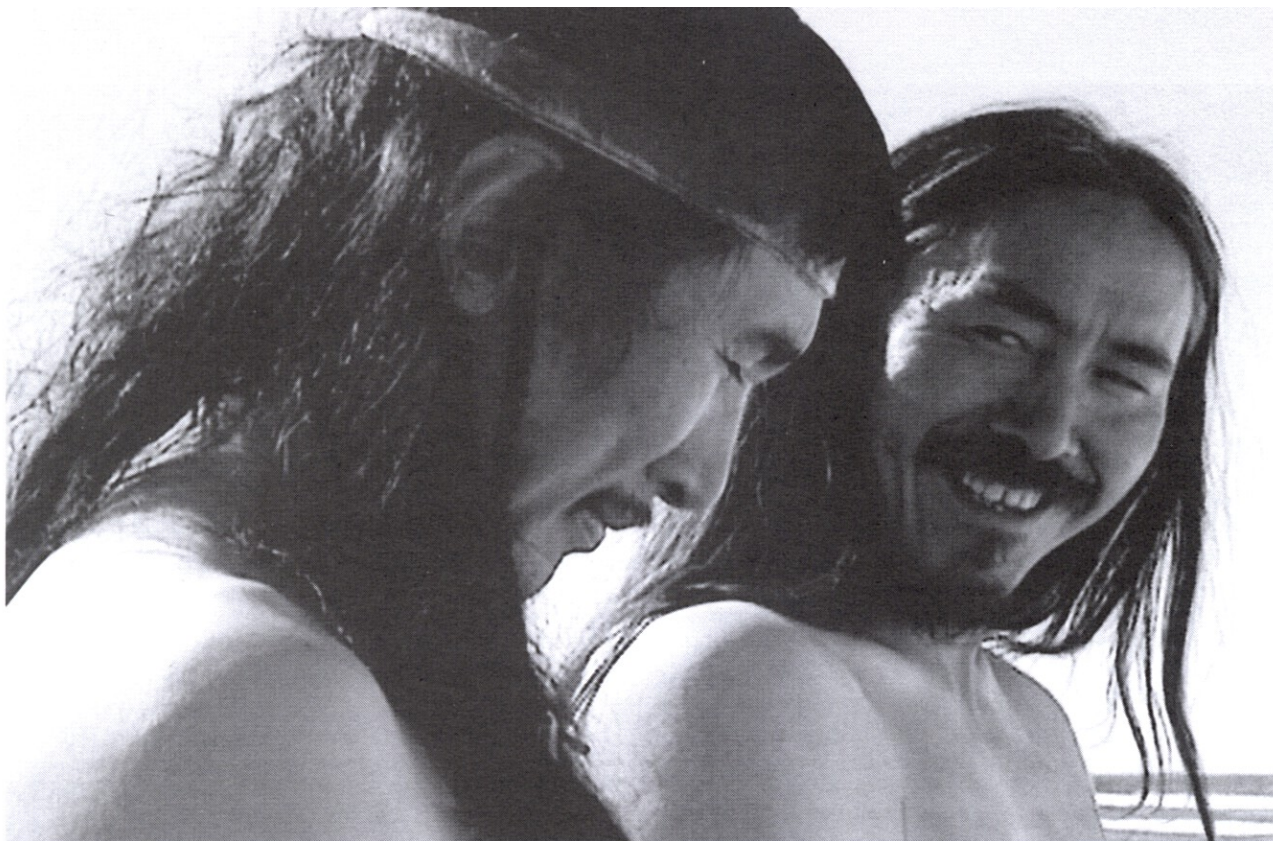
the generational clash highlights the negative impact of a Westernized society that does not place as much value on familial ties.

The urgency of Koro's quest to find a new leader for his people speaks to the ongoing erosion of Maori traditions through its contact with Pakeha culture. Throughout the film the viewer is provided with evidence that Pai is destined to be the new leader, but Koro cannot abide a female partaking of the male traditions of taiaha (spear fighting) and haka (a war dance). Pai represents the culture clash defined not only as Maori vs. Pakeha, but also as man vs. women, or more generally tradition vs. modernity. Only by embracing a female leader for his people can Koro save their heritage and culture from complete assimilation.

The film's title comes from an ancient Maori legend, which tells of their ancestor, Paikea who rode on the back of a whale across the ocean to found the first Maori settlement in New Zealand. Pai's leadership potential (she is named after the ancestor) is made evident not only by her skill at traditional Maori activities, but also in her spiritual connection to the great ancestor. The film opens with shots of whales swimming under water as Pai's voiceover explains her birth, immediately linking her to the whales and the sea. Throughout the film, we see numerous shots of her looking out at the ocean, communicating silently with the whales. When her father tries to take her back to Europe with him she makes him turn the car around; she is bound to the land/sea and cannot leave it.

The presence of indigenous protagonists in these three films (and entire casts in two of them) evidences a new interest in the non-White citizen of the nation and bodes well for a revitalization of national cinema. These films allow the viewer to identify with the indigenous other through varying aesthetic techniques, including point of view camera work and the use of voice. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Noyce films events and people from Molly's point of view to help us understand her feelings. Most powerful are the shots of the Aboriginal tracker (played by veteran





TOP: Atanarjuat (Natar Ungalaaq) and his brother, Amaqjuag (Pakak Innuksuk) share a rare peaceful moment.

ABOVE: Atuat (Sylvia Ivalu) holds Kumaglak (Apayata Kotierk), the son who will carry on Atanarjuat's family name.



Aboriginal actor, David Gulpilil, who first gained global attention in *Walkabout*) seen from Molly's vantage point — his face is distorted and he looms over the camera and the viewer. In addition, a voice-over spoken by the real Molly bookends the film. At the film's opening, Molly pulls us into her world by telling us the story of the spirit bird that her mother told her before she was taken from her home. After the diegetic story is completed, Molly's voice accompanies documentary footage of her and Daisy at Jigalong, as women of ages 84 and 78 respectively. Hearing Molly's voice testify to her experience emphasizes its reality for the viewer and strengthens our identification with her. Moreover, this aesthetic choice helps contemporary viewers become intimately connected to the events of the past, and evidences aboriginals' continued existence and vital presence in Australia.

In addition to familiar suturing techniques, Noyce borrows stylistic conventions from European art cinema, echoing the roots of Australian national cinema. The prevalence of silence on the sound track and the lack of insistence on dramatic activity set *Rabbit-Proof Fence* apart from Hollywood genre films. Long periods of silence give the film and the journey it chronicles a weighty quality, and highlight the drudgery of the 1500-mile trek. The film's short bursts of drama are encased in long scenes featuring nothing but walking. Noyce's spare editing underscores the length and difficulty of the girls' journey. It also pays homage to a more indigenous aesthetic style, as characterized by scholars of Aboriginal media, Michael Meadows and Helen Molnar. This style is identified with a preponderance of "long takes and natural sound," specifically, "long, uninterrupted shots of the landscape"<sup>7</sup> used in Aboriginal productions to highlight significant landmarks for the Aboriginal population.<sup>8</sup>

Noyce's comfort with inaction and slow pacing as well as the focus on landscape in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* evidence his unique blend of European and indigenous aesthetics. The film's imagery calls to mind the Australian-inflected European art cinema tradition, initiated with Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). Weir's film has been credited with the 1970s renaissance of Australian national cinema. Noyce echoes Weir's oscillation between static and moving camera in *Picnic* to underscore the tension in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* between the girls' sense of entrapment within and steady movement through the Australian outback. The overwhelming presence of nature is a theme common to both films, and to many other classics of Australian cinema. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is rooted in Australia's national cinema tradition, but it explodes that tradition's white European hegemony by exposing the nation's history of Aboriginal mistreatment.

*Atanarjuat* too blends Western and indigenous cinematic traditions to create a specific aesthetic style designed to bridge the gap between the audience and the characters on the screen. Kunuk's intention is to counteract not only the distancing tendency of the documentary form, but to speak back to the stereotyping of native peoples in feature film. As in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, viewers are encouraged to identify with the indigenous characters rather than regard them with contempt. Although the camera rarely places us in

*Atanarjuat*'s specific subject position, Cohn's camera work situates the viewer in *Atanarjuat*'s family grouping. He shot the film on widescreen (16:9) digital Betacam and his camerawork is highly mobile. As the production notes suggest, "The film's visual strategy was designed to heighten the audience's sense of being there, despite the exotic locale . . . . The goal of *Atanarjuat* is to make the viewer feel *inside* the action looking out rather than outside looking in. This lets people forget how far away they really are, and identify with the story and characters as if they were just like us."<sup>9</sup>

Cohn places the viewer right in the middle of the action, whether riding on a speeding dogsled, participating in a group discussion or eating a communal meal. To create the feeling of intimacy throughout the film, cameramen actually rode on the sleds, ran alongside *Atanarjuat*, and used shoulder-mounted cameras. In one of the most vivid examples of Cohn's style, we are trapped in the confined space of an igloo as *Atanarjuat* exacts his revenge on Oki. He has slicked the base of the igloo and buried a pair of ice skates and a club in the snow outside. When Oki and his friends enter to share in a meal of fresh meat, we enter with them and enjoy *Atanarjuat*'s hospitality, until suddenly he attacks them with his weapon. The camera swings in tight circles to follow the struggle and we are made dizzy with the sense of chaos and imminent danger. When *Atanarjuat* stops the fight and calls for an end to the violence, we are reeling with surprise and relief, as are Oki and his gang. Cohn's intimate and active camera positioning inserts us into this climactic moment in the film's narrative.

Generally, the pace of the film is slow and methodical, much like that of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and long takes document mundane activities in daily Inuit life, such as the tending of seal oil lamps and the preparation of raw meat. These scenes are lengthy and undramatic. The film's deliberate and spare editing also impacts its pace. Rather than directing the audience's attention with quick cutting, Kunuk lets the spectator experience the film as a whole, not as a succession of dramatic moments. Describing a video he made of a seal hunt, Kunuk explains his style:

An Inuk is standing over a hole in the ice. His arm is upraised, he is holding a spear. The shot is taken from some distance away, so that the figure is very small. The figure continues to stand, the camera does not move. The intensity of the moment is not produced by close ups jump cuts, acting or editing. We are in 'real time.' The intensity leaves us, we are bored. But we still wait. Occasionally it returns, we anticipate the seal, the sudden strike, the action. But it does not take place. How long have we waited, have we watched this hunter - five minutes? ten? - before we realize we are waiting for him to strike and he is waiting for the seal, and so we too are in a way waiting for the seal and perhaps our waiting and his are the same. As we continue to watch we begin to understand that hunting a seal is not about the strike, the sudden moment of action, but rather the anticipation, the boredom, the intensity, the exhaustion, the waiting. After about fifteen minutes, the video ends. We never see the strike.<sup>10</sup>



Despite its Inuit specificity, Kunuk's general aesthetic echoes the roots of Canadian national cinema. The documentary feel and ethnographic intent of the film recall the early work of the National Film Board (NFB), whose mission was to represent Canada to Canadians and to other nations. Over sixty years after its founding, Kunuk's film extends this mission to the Inuit. *Atanarjuat* is most reminiscent of the Québécois *cinéma direct* projects of the 1960s, like *Les Raquetteurs* (Gilles Groulx and Michel Brault, 1958) and *Pour la Suite du Monde* (Pierre Perrault and Michel Brault, 1963), that captured the cultural specificity of the Québécois and contributed to French-Canadians' sense of national pride. Rooted in national cinema traditions, Kunuk's film ultimately expands them by introducing the possibility of an indigenous feature film aesthetic.

In contrast, *Whale Rider* evidences a much more conventional style. Caro uses voiceover narration to suture us into Pai's point of view. Beginning the film and ending it, Pai's voice tells us about her spiritual connection to the ancestors and her quest to gain the respect of her grandfather. The camera rarely takes her point of view, instead we get long shots of Castle-Hughes' very expressive face; her pain and joy are right on the surface and we sympathize with her at every moment. The plot takes shape around Pai's struggle and focuses on the key moments of her growing knowledge and connection to her Maori heritage. The acting and narrative structure were carefully designed to have maximum emotional impact.

While typical Western cinematic devices prevail, *Whale Rider* does draw upon what we might call a Maori aesthetic. Caro's film faintly echoes Barry Barclay's documentation of Maori life in his foundational feature films, specifically *Ngati's* portrayal of a tightly-knit community coming to terms with the influence of Pakeha society. Scenes of local rituals and community gatherings were a fundamental part of Barclay's film and he sought to chronicle as many of the quotidian aspects of Maori life as he could, in order to respectfully represent his culture on screen.<sup>11</sup> Caro seems to follow in his footsteps, particularly in her representations of community members who gather at the marae or in someone's home. *Ngati* pays attention to these details on a smaller scale; the actions Barclay filmed do not always have significance in the overall narrative. His film is more intimate in scope, whereas the focus in *Whale Rider* is always on the dramatic events that structure the plot. Caro has adapted some of the traditions of Maori filmmaking to a more mainstream cinema aesthetic.

*Atanarjuat*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Whale Rider* draw upon the stylistic and thematic traditions of their respective national cinemas, but all three infuse these traditions with a new vision and purpose. In doing so they revitalize the goals of national cinema and the sense of identity that unites the people of each nation. All three films give voice to the silenced, colonized other, but in different ways. I'd like to suggest a distinction between the films that speaks to their respective goals and target audiences, specifically a distinction between films made with an ethnographic impulse and those that are spectacle-driven.

*Atanarjuat* was made primarily for Inuit audiences so

that they could see positive and accurate images of themselves on the screen. In this sense, the film speaks back to all the reprehensible portrayals of Inuits (Eskimos) throughout the history of cinema. Ethnographic in its intentions, it focuses on the recovery of a forgotten myth, lost traditions and abandoned cultural practices. Kunuk's production team re-learned traditional forms of hunting and craftsmanship in order to accurately re-create Inuit life before contact. The film was made according to a specific Inuit production process characterized by consensus and consultation, involving everyone in the decisions and checking with elders to ensure the film's cultural truth. Ultimately the film instilled knowledge and pride in young Inuit, who have a terribly high suicide rate. Kunuk has described seeing children playing *Atanarjuat* in the streets of his hometown.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Whale Rider* were clearly made for international consumption, to be marketed through the festival circuit. They worked with higher budgets and thus have higher production values, including the use of film rather than digital video. Both films feature local content that is globally-inflected and spectacle-driven. In each film the story hinges on a dramatic moment in which the global audience's sympathy for the young protagonists is powerfully evoked. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence* this scene comes as Molly, Daisy and Gracie are crossing the Australian desert. The fence has fallen down and can no longer act as a guide. The three girls are overcome with hunger, thirst and fatigue; their bodies are emaciated, and the cinematography portrays them as mirages, their frail images flickering in the sun-distorted landscape. Finally too tired to go on, they collapse in the sand, their faces caked with dirt and their skin singed by the sun. It is a moment of utter despair, but the audience is quickly rewarded with Molly's determination to go on.

*Whale Rider's* climactic moment is split between Pai's moving speech in honor of her grandfather and the beaching of the whales. Caro begins with a scene of Pai struggling to deliver a speech she has written about her heritage. Standing on a stage high above the audience, Pai speaks about her grandfather's search for a new leader for her people, demonstrating her prescient understanding of the importance of this quest and her belief that both men and women should be allowed to represent her people. Interspersed with these scenes are shots of Koro emerging from this house to see several whales who have beached themselves. This sequence serves as the ultimate proof of Pai's connection to the ancestor, as she had called for his assistance in Koro's search, and he came. As the family members attempt to turn the whales around, Pai climbs on the back of the largest male and rides with him into the ocean; she becomes the whale rider. The viewer is positioned less as a member of the community in these sequences, and more as an empathetic observer to the spectacle. When Pai is taken out to sea on the whale's back, we are left with some doubt as to whether or not she survives, but this anxiety is quickly quelled with a scene in the hospital. Pai has recovered and the film ends as Koro visits her to ask her forgiveness.



As I've suggested, despite their differing approaches to indigenous culture, each film has had an enormous impact, not only on its national cinema, but also in the public sphere as well. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Atanarjuat* raised awareness of specific events in colonial history that had been elided in official discourse. In addition, the existence of the first Inuit language feature film has suggested the need for changes in Canadian film policy, which currently operates under a bilingual system with funding for films in English and in French. In New Zealand, the success of *Whale Rider*, a Maori film by a Pakeha filmmaker, has also brought the possibility of change in state film policy. Recently Barry Barclay and some colleagues submitted a proposal for government funding to be set aside specifically for films made by Maori filmmakers. The proposal strongly argues that Maori must speak for themselves, rather than have non-Maori speak for them.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly in Australia, two government initiatives sparked by the production of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (directed by a White Australian) address this issue. The Australian Film Commission has created a training program for Indigenous Film and TV production and also tackled questions of protocol with its paper, "Towards a Protocol for Filmmakers Working with Indigenous Content and Indigenous Communities." The document poses questions such as "How can non-Indigenous filmmakers be encouraged to get the portrayal of Indigenous peoples 'right'?" and it uses *Rabbit-Proof Fence* as a model for a positive working relationship between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous filmmakers.<sup>14</sup>

These new developments in national cinema raise an important question: who should be making indigenous cinema? Is indigenous cinema production solely the right and responsibility of indigenous filmmakers? While indigenous media scholars suggest that indigenous people should be allowed to depict themselves on screen, is their role limited to that of director?

David MacDougall sums up the contemporary situation for indigenous visual culture best, urging us to recognize that

**. . . ethnographic films for multiple audiences must confront contending versions of reality. Further they must acknowledge historical experiences which overshadow any text and which inevitably escape from it. I think that we will therefore see films which become repositories of multiple authorship, confrontation, and exchange . . . films which are produced by and belong equally to two cultures . . . If we are in the midst of a new revolution, as I believe we are, it is one which is interested in multiple voices and which might be called an intertextual cinema.<sup>15</sup>**

*Atanarjuat*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, and *Whale Rider* are examples of MacDougall's intertextual cinema, in their ability to blend ethnographic and indigenous media traditions with feature film conventions, allowing for the wide dissemination of historically silenced voices. These voices speak a crucial cultural message: indigenous cultures are still here and may suggest a new direction for national cinemas.

*Atanarjuat*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Whale Rider* usher in a newer, revitalized form of national cinema, one that can stand up to the homogenizing powers of globalization. While they attract global audiences, they remain firmly rooted in a specific local culture and place. They not only entertain diverse viewers, but they also empower the colonized other within the postcolonial nation. What more could national cinemas hope for?

**Jennifer L. Gauthier** is Assistant Professor of Communication at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia. She has written and presented papers on Canadian, Australian and New Zealand national cinema and cultural policy. Her dissertation, "Split Screen: National Cinema, Cultural Policy and Identity in Canada" is currently being revised for publication. She has also taught film history and theory at Vassar College.

#### NOTES

- 1 Although Roeg is a British director, his film is often included in the canon of foundational Australian films, and as Tom O'Regan points out, Australians have adopted this film as their own. See O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 56.
- 2 Like many of his contemporaries in Canada and Australia, Tamahori migrated to Hollywood and has directed, among other things, the most recent James Bond installment, *Die Another Day* (2002).
- 3 This historical moment is alternately referred to as "The Lost Generation," but the adjective "stolen" more clearly conveys the force with which the children were taken from their families. In addition, the children were not, strictly speaking, lost; it was quite clear that they had been taken to work camps spread across the nation.
- 4 The full text of the report of available online at <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/>>. The website is maintained by the Reconciliation and Social Justice Library of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.
- 5 See for example Robert Paine, ed. *The White Arctic: Anthropological Essays on Tutelage and Ethnicity*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977.
- 6 Native Networks, "Zacharias Kunuk on *Atanarjuat*." Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian. Available at [http://www.nativenetworks.si.edu/features/zk\\_interview3.html](http://www.nativenetworks.si.edu/features/zk_interview3.html).
- 7 Michael Meadows, "Ideas from the bush: indigenous television in Australia and Canada," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 20 no. 2 (1995): pp. 11–12.
- 8 Helen Molnar and Michael Meadows, *Songlines to Satellites: Indigenous Communication in Australia, The South Pacific and Canada*, Australia: Pluto Press, 2001, p. 49.
- 9 *Atanarjuat*, DVD Production Notes, (original emphasis), Igloolik Isuma Productions, 2001.
- 10 Peter Kulchyski, "The Postmodern and the Paleolithic: Notes on Technology and Native Community in the Far North," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13 no. 3 (1989): pp. 60–61.
- 11 Barry Barclay, "The Control of One's Own Image," *Illusions* 8 (1988): pp. 8–14.
- 12 Miriam Hill, "Action figures next step for *Atanarjuat*," *Nunatsiaq News* 5 April 2002. Available at <[http://www.nunatsiaq.com/archives/nunavut/020405/news/nunavut/20405\\_6.html](http://www.nunatsiaq.com/archives/nunavut/020405/news/nunavut/20405_6.html)>.
- 13 Barry Barclay, Merata Mita, and Tainui Stephens, "Mana Maori Paepae." Document shared with the author by Barry Barclay.
- 14 Australian Film Commission, "Towards and Protocol for Filmmakers Working with Indigenous Content and Indigenous Communities," February 2003, p. 9. Available at <http://www.afc.gov.au/protocols.index.html>.
- 15 David MacDougall, "Complicities of Style," in Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton, eds., *Film as Ethnography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 97.



## LETTERS

In the last issue I edited, #60, on East Asian Cinemas, I included an article by Catherine Russell, "Three Japanese Actresses of the 1950s: Modernity, Femininity and the Performance of Everyday Life." In issue #62, Robin Wood, as editor, printed a letter in response to Dr. Russell that was highly critical of her argument, and appended to it a similarly critical response of his own. Dr. Russell wrote a reply to both which was printed in the last issue.

In the meantime, we received and responded to a letter from the Film Studies Association of Canada (see below). There is one last exchange here: a final letter from Robin and a closure of debate by Dr. Russell.  
*Susan Morrison*

20 February 2004

To the Collective:

We write in reference to the editorial comment offered by Robin Wood on Catherine Russell's article on Ozu, which appeared in *CineAction* #62.

We do not recall ever seeing a writer being denounced by one of her own editors in the pages of the magazine where her work appeared. That this writer was denounced without an opportunity to rebut in the same issue is also something we have never seen. So we would like to make the following query:

Does *CineAction* have any policy at all regarding the rights of their writers to (1) expect support from those who appear on the masthead of the magazine as editors (as Robin Wood does), and (2) to expect the opportunity to answer any reasoned critiques (such as that of Alexander Jacoby's, also found in *CineAction* #62) or more *ad hominem* attacks (such as Wood's) in the same issue in which they appear?

If such a policy exists, we urge *CineAction* to let the Canadian film community know about it. If no such policy exists, and those who write for *CineAction* can expect no protection or consideration from the editors who publish their writing in the magazine, we urge *CineAction* to make this explicit as well.

Yours faithfully,

The Executive of the Film Studies Association of Canada

Brenda Austin-Smith,

Dave Douglas, Zoë Druick, Janina Falkowska, Chris Gittings, Christine Ramsay, Christina Stoyanova, Pierre Véronneau, Jerry White

### From CineAction

Regular readers of this magazine may know that one or two members of the editorial collective on a rotating basis edit each issue. The editor is responsible for the theme of the issue and for review, selection and editing of submissions. But, of course, all the editors are film critics as well, fully involved with writing about and debating issues in film studies. We encourage critical debate and exchange and occasionally receive letters in response to articles. We include ourselves as engaged participants in such debates; spirited, even sharp, disagreement among critics is important for a vital film culture. One such exchange concerning Catherine Russell's article on Japanese cinema continues above. We also acknowledge that writer's replies to letters are best included, if possible, in the same issue and will endeavour to follow that practice in the future.

Scott Forsyth,

for the editorial collective

### Robin Wood's response to Catherine Russell's letter in issue #63

I have a number of comments on Ms. Russell's letter:

1. Each issue of *CineAction* has a different editor (in some cases two editors) who has sole responsibility. Ms. Russell's article appeared in an issue edited by Susan Morrison, and I'm sure Susan would have been extremely annoyed if I had tried to intervene. I did not read Ms. Russell's article until it appeared in print; I responded to it as a critic, not as an editor. I saw no reason to 'invite' Ms. Russell to 'defend' herself - she was obviously at liberty to do so, and has in fact done so. Surely 'the common pursuit of true judgement' must take precedence over any petty personal annoyance. What matters is how we are to read Ozu.

2. In the editorial to which she refers I suggested that criticism should always be centred on 'questions of value' (a phrase that for me immediately evokes the work of E.R. Leavis): the value which we ascribe to a given work. Ms. Russell changes this to 'questions of values', meaning at first the values of different critics, though in the next sentence it becomes the values expressed within different works. The confusion here reminds me of one of those alien beings in horror films that can change shape within seconds, and I shall not attempt to elucidate her actual meaning.

3. I am puzzled by Ms. Russell's

statement that she 'chooses' to read Ozu as a conservative. Can a responsible critic choose an interpretation, supposedly from a range of possibilities, as one might choose to lead a heart rather than a diamond? I would have thought one arrived at one through careful textual analysis, testing it in relation to the entire work.

4. My objection to Ms. Russell's article was quite explicitly based upon one sentence, in which she says (and it remains there in print for all to see) '...Hara's character never actually gets married', a statement that is quite simply and plainly untrue. She now surreptitiously substitutes a different sentence ('...Hara is never seen to be happily married') and pretends that that is what she originally said. I shall not comment on the ethics of this, but it scarcely facilitates a meaningful critical exchange. In fact, Hara is never seen to be married in the films, happily or not. Late Spring is the only one in which she gets married during the running time, and she is never shown after the wedding day. We see her first bowed down under the cumbersome traditional wedding dress, miserable and helpless, the sequence ending eloquently with a shot of the now empty mirror after she is led off to the ceremony. If (as Ms. Russell asserts) 'this refusal of marriage' does not 'constitute a "resistance" to the institution of marriage', what does it constitute? And how can 'a critique of marriage' not be 'a political gesture'?

5. My own 'progressive' reading of Ozu in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film* (more precisely, of the three films in which Setsuko Hara plays 'Noriko') was supported by detailed textual analysis (the only way, in my opinion, to arrive at a work's meaning and, consequently, value). Ms. Russell neither shows me where I went wrong nor offers any comparably detailed reading, merely 'choosing' a conservative one. She supports this choice mainly by appealing to Japanese culture at that period, in my view a very dangerous proceeding, especially in relation to an artist as idiosyncratic and intransigent as Ozu. I must, however, thank her for her generous permission to 'hold on' to my 'progressive' reading. I shall continue to do so until such time as it is effectively challenged.

Robin Wood

### Catherine Russell's response

Dr. Russell declined the opportunity to respond to Robin Wood's letter.



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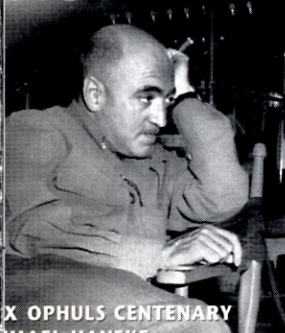
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